

The State is Back

The conception of the State is being contested across the globe. The dominant discourse pushes for a ‘receding State.’ This has received gleeful welcome, especially from the local elite in developing countries. They have used the groundswell against ineffective mediocrity and mismanagement (by these very elite) to paint a black picture of the State itself.

But it has become very clear that the State is only receding from its social obligations to the vast majority of its citizens, especially the marginalized and the increasingly impoverished. It still acts as provider for the very same (market) institutions and (capital-rich) classes that pay fanatical lip-service to the primacy of the market, but use the state to corner resources for themselves.

There is a backlash to the practice of a ‘receding State’. The people of Venezuela and Brazil and now, the people of India too have made their choices known.

Avijit Pathak sees in the recent electoral verdict in India the articulation of the need to reinvent the welfare state, and to strike a balance between meaningful privatisation and vibrant public enterprise.

For **Neera Chandhoke** the feedback is that the state remains central to individual and collective life, despite all the changes that have been effected through the practices of governance. Whatever the powers that be and their varied supporters may opine, the popular perception of the State remains unchanged. And in a democracy that choice must prevail.

V Vivekanandan looks at ambiguities and contradictions that dominate the discourse relating to the State, especially in South India, with a special focus on Kerala. These ambiguities contaminate the perception of the role of Civil Society, predominantly understood to mean the NGO. Vivekanandan calls for a concerted effort by Civil

Society to redefine the role of the State, and as a corollary, to articulate the nature and role of Civil Society itself.

Sociology of the Verdict: Is it a New Beginning? Avijit Pathak, *Deccan Herald*, May 25, 2004. <http://www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/may252004/top.asp>
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The State in Popular Imagination, Neera Chandhoke, *The Hindu*, 06 April 2004.
<http://www.hindu.com/2004/04/06/stories/2004040601971000.htm>
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The Role of the State and NGOs in Southern India, V. Vivekanandan, by email, May 2004. [C.ELDOC



Sociology of the Verdict: Is it a New Beginning?

Avijit Pathak

Indian democracy, as its recent experimentation suggests, is remarkably powerful. It resists all manipulative designs, alters the status quo, and reminds us of the need for a new beginning. Before we begin to celebrate its immense potential, there are, however, two points of caution we should not lose sight of.

First, even when the voters have demonstrated their penetrating insight, one should not be tempted to romanticise the act of voting right. Because, as history shows, the same voters can elect communalists, semi-fascists, corrupt manipulators and even criminals as their representatives. And herein lies the second point relating to the structural limits of the practice of representative democracy. A voter, it should not be forgotten, often feels helpless. He or she is almost compelled to choose the so-called 'lesser evil', and this choice, as a result, is not necessarily an act of positive affirmation, but often an expression of anger and rejection. There is no way we can escape from the reality of 'negative voting'.



Yet, as we have indicated, these shortcomings notwithstanding, our democracy is endowed with immense possibilities. In fact, as the recent verdict conveys, there are three distinctively meaningful social messages. If we really learn and internalise the implications of these messages, we can take our democracy to a higher level of maturity.

The first message is cultural. It reveals what is enduring about this old and vibrant civilisation: its spirit of assimilation, synthesis and tolerance. This is indeed remarkable. Even today many advanced democratic nations have not been able to demonstrate this wisdom, courage and catholicity. But for us, it is quite natural and spontaneous, because it is the way our civilisation has been evolving. It invites and accommodates. It does not exclude and reject. The politics of cultural exclusion, however, sought to make us narrow, blind and parochial. Despite poverty and hunger, it has an expanded heart that embraces everyday.

Folk wisdom

The second message is about folk wisdom. No hidden persuader, no propaganda machinery can paralyse it completely. This time we saw what could be regarded as the Pramod Mahajan style of corporate campaigning. It had two components — a) it created a hyper-real world in which the image of a 'Shining India' reigned supreme, a world filled with technological gadgets, express highways, sensex miracles and disinvestment wonders, and b) it used technological experts to propagate political messages; in other words, it privileged technology over politics.

But then, as the verdict demonstrates, the projection of politics as a 'feel good' ad has failed to work. Because people with their characteristic folk wisdom could see the depthlessness in this design; they could see the story of the other India they experience everyday: farmers committing suicide, people without jobs, schools without blackboards, and villages without drinking water. Folk wisdom has indeed demythologised technology.



The third message is related to the second one. It shows that the welfare state in India cannot be thrown into garbage. It has to play a constructive role, particularly when 600 million people continue to have problems relating to employment, health, education and shelter, and without social security economic globalisation is likely to cause tremendous insecurity and instability in society.

It is really sad that since the days of 'economic reforms' the agenda of the welfare state has been retreating; distributive justice, fulfillment of basic needs, and people's state — these ideals were almost forgotten in the name of what Arun Shourie would have regarded as the historic need of 'disinvestment'. **But then, the verdict seems to be telling us that there is a need to reinvent the welfare state, and we must establish a balance between the economy and politics, market and state, meaningful privatisation and vibrant public enterprise.**

It needs to be seen whether the new government learns from these messages, and accordingly.

Would it be a new beginning? Or, would it be, as cynics argue, the same old story of rivalry, factionalism, betrayal and broken promises? 

The State in Popular Imagination

Neera Chandhoke

It is the state that is central to individual and collective life, despite all the changes that have been effected through the practices of governance.

THE TENTH Plan suggests that given market liberalism and globalisation, the state should yield to the market and the civil society in many areas where it, so far, "had a direct but distortionary and inefficient presence ... many developmental functions as well as functions that provide stability to the social order have to be progressively performed by the market and the civil society organisations. It means extension of the market and civil society domain at the expense of the state in some areas." The Tenth Plan accordingly recommends that the role of voluntary organisations, non-profit making companies, corporate bodies, cooperatives, and trusts be strengthened in social and economic development. The Plan in effect deepens the thrust that had originally been initiated by the Seventh Five-Year Plan towards reliance on the voluntary sector as an agent of social development. The Ministries that subsequently came to rely heavily on NGOs (non-governmental organisations) are those of rural development, health and family welfare, social justice and empowerment, human resource development, and of environment and forests.

Governance – 'off loading' responsibility

The 'off loading' of welfare services, which were for long seen as the responsibility of the democratic state, is part of what in contemporary parlance is called 'governance'. The concept of governance has attracted

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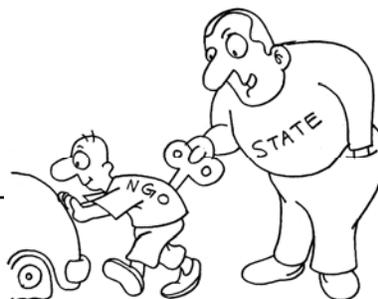
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a fair amount of acclaim from theorists and political practitioners in recent times. For the practices of governance promise an exit from centrally controlled bureaucratic, hierarchical, and overloaded structures of decision-making, which are judged inept simply because they are unable to act either quickly or efficiently. On the other hand, NGOs are seen to possess certain virtues: they are relatively unburdened with large bureaucracies, they are more flexible and more receptive to innovation than government officials are, and they are able to identify and respond to the needs of the grassroots because they are in close touch with their constituencies.

However, the concept of governance has also managed to generate considerable doubt in other theoretical quarters. What for instance has happened to the state or at least the state as we have come to be familiar with it for much of the 20th century? For governance gestures towards the *decentering* of what used to be a single locus of authority and legitimacy — the state. Many scholars seem to agree that the state has either been hollowed out or that it has disappeared. The question that perhaps is significant for democratic theory is: what does the ordinary citizen think of the practices of governance? Today, the citizen is presented with a number of agencies that are in the business of delivering services and solving problems, from water harvesting to training people for local self-government.

Has all this – off loading’ - served to dislocate the `welfarist’ state from the centre of political imaginations?

The answer to these questions is perhaps best elucidated through reflection on some of the findings of our research project on



'Rights, Representation, and the Poor' that was conducted in Delhi in 2003. The project surveying 1401 citizens across different categories of residential settlements in the city-planned colonies, unauthorised regularised colonies, unauthorised unregularised colonies, and *jhuggi jhopris* (J.J.) and slums, seeks to foreground the voices of those *who are governed*, rather than concentrate on those who are engaged in governance.

The findings are of some interest. For instance, in response to the question of who is responsible for meeting people's basic needs, the majority of our respondents answered that it is the *government's responsibility to do so*. And this even if meeting basic needs was not identified as a personal problem for the respondent.

Therefore, even though only 13 per cent of the people who live in planned colonies identified basic needs as a big or one of the biggest problems for them individually, 80 per cent of the same constituency was of the opinion that it was the government's responsibility to meet basic needs. Equally, whereas 45 per cent of the residents living in unauthorised, unregularised colonies opined that meeting basic needs was not a problem for them, 83 per cent believed that the government was responsible for meeting basic needs, the corresponding figures being 72 per cent of the population who live in unauthorised regularised colonies, and 83 per cent of the residents who live in J.J. colonies, and slums.

When it came to problem solving, the respondents were asked who they usually approached: a 'big man' that is caste, religious, and regional leaders, whether they approached the judiciary, whether they solved the problems on their own, whether they had ever participated in demonstrations, public protest, or other forms of direct action, or whether they had approached the government to help them. Our findings show that whereas 28 per cent of the respondents had approached political parties to solve their problems, only 2 per cent had approached the judiciary, only 9 per cent had approached 'big men' for

help, hardly 10 per cent had resorted to direct action, and 17 per cent had engaged in self-provisioning action.

The largest percentage of our respondents, that is 36 per cent, had approached the government directly. The variation across colonies is not much in this respect; 40 per cent of the respondents in the jhuggi jhopris and slums, 35 per cent of the inhabitants of the unauthorised unregularised colonies, 32 per cent of the residents of the unauthorised regularised colonies, and 35 per cent of the residents of the planned colonies normally approach the government for resolving their problems. Out of this number, less than one per cent had approached the government through their party representatives. About 75 per cent of the 36 per cent who had approached the government said that they had taken the help of their acquaintances and family to do so. Not a single person had asked the NGOs for help in approaching the government.

The state, it is evident, continues to loom large in the collective imagination when it comes to providing the basic conditions that enable people to live a life of dignity. It is the state that is central to individual and collective life, despite all the changes that have been effected through the practices of governance. This calls for some explanation.

Why do people continue to repose hope in a state that has after all been found wanting when it comes to the delivery of the basic conditions of human well-being?

India's position has after all slipped from 24 to 127 in the Human Development Report 2003, and though the proportion of people living on less than \$1-a-day has declined from 42 per cent in 1993-94 to 35 per cent in 2001, 40 per cent of the world's poor live in India. Widespread malnutrition, poor infrastructure in the area of health, and high mortality rates among the poor and *Dalits* make the health scene a grim one. The country has the world's highest number of hungry people, that is 233 million despite huge buffer stocks of food. The government's

record in providing services-sanitation, clean drinking water, electricity, housing, and jobs is even bleaker.

Yet it is clear that across the board, citizens continue to have high expectations of the state despite the fact that the government has begun to delegate more and more of its responsibility to civil society organisations. Why?

Perhaps the image of the 'Nehruvian' state as the repository of public interest is still embedded in the popular consciousness despite all changes in the nature of the state.

The second reason lies in the realm of accountability. It is just not clear whom the NGOs are accountable to: their clients, the government, multilateral funding agencies, or northern NGOs who also fund them. When welfare functions become the business of organisations, some within the state, some outside, upon which agency does the mantle of responsibility fall? It is after all easier to hold the state accountable than voluntary agencies, which have made their appearance on to the scene of service delivery. And accountability does lie at the heart of democratic theory.

The general consensus today is that the state is the problem. Instead of trying to make the state deliver what it has promised through constitutions, laws, and rhetorical flourishes, policy makers would rather establish a parallel system, which can substitute for the state in areas of service delivery.

And yet one significant factor inhibits the legitimisation of this plan, the fact that ordinary citizens, as the responses to our questionnaire show, repose little hope in the ability of civil society agents to negotiate their problems. They would rather fix responsibility on the state➡

The Role of the State and NGOs in Southern India

V. Vivekanandan

In recent times, the role of the State has been debated in the context of the Liberalisation, Privatisation, Globalisation (LPG) process. While there is no real consensus on the changes taking place, very clearly the leftist view, which seems to be shared by most NGOs (especially "issue-based" NGOs), is to fight the perceived weakening of the state and its withdrawal from many spheres and the entry of private corporations into those spheres.

While I think most might today be ready to agree that the Government has no reason to run hotels, there is still no consensus on privatisation of many public sector undertakings (PSUs). However, through a combination of globalisation pressures, lack of public funds, and a new ideology embraced by the elite and the middle class, the role of the State/Government is changing slowly but surely. The role of the State in welfare and social services is another area of confusion. Very clearly the State still has a major role to play in promotion of education, health and social security. However, the quality of the State services is declining and gross inefficiencies are noticeable.

Is the answer to this problem to be found in making the State systems more efficient through transparency, decentralisation and people's participation?

Or is it to be found in handing over tasks to NGOs and other non-State actors?

In the development arena, the debate is somewhat muted as the role of the State is somehow considered the key by all. Along with promotion of the private sector and the opening up of the economy, the state and

central Governments in India are implementing a number of poverty alleviation programmes.

The more funds the State pumps into poverty alleviation, the less useful it seems. Those who work in the field can observe the distortions created by virtually all subsidy schemes, as there is every reason for the politicians to use them for vote bank building.

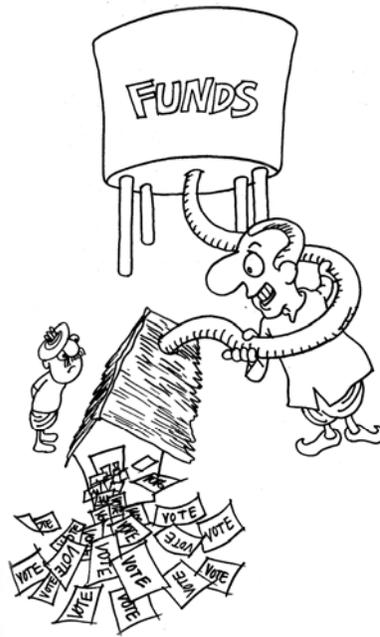
Appropriating Civil Society Spaces

In the southern states, which have much diversity, there is also much that is in common. I find many interesting patterns in strategies for poverty alleviation.

For instance, Kerala and Andhra have *Kudumbashree* and *Velugu* respectively. In both programmes, the Government has taken up NGO-style interventions, mobilising poor women into SHGs and promoting micro-credit and micro-enterprises.

In both, the Governments are working in competition rather than collaboration with NGOs.

There are differences however. In Kerala, the *Kudumbashree* works through the *Panchayats* while *Velugu* in Andhra bypasses the *Panchayats* also. In Tamil Nadu, the Government has adopted a different strategy. It promotes NGO intervention through SHGs by providing financial support to NGOs in a stereotyped scheme that turns



NGOs into "sub-contractors" and leads to a mushrooming of such NGOs.

I am not too familiar with the Karnataka situation where the Government is a recent entrant into the SHG business through *the Sthree Shakti* Project of S.M.Krishna.

Generally, it also creates conditions for state-sponsored SHGs to act in competition with NGO-sponsored SHGs. However, till recently, the Karnataka Government has not put major finances into the programme and hence the competition between NGOs and the Government is not as severe as in Kerala and Andhra.

In the southern states, the driving force seems to be populism that is the result of highly competitive politics and the pressure to show results, along with a lack of creativity. The Governments just latch on to anything new from the NGO sector and appropriate it in their hurry to 'deliver' development to the masses. Many a time the consequence is the disruption of NGO work that was developed painstakingly over a long period.

New Forms of Civil Society

The development of the civil society and the NGOs is also perhaps stronger in south India and there is reason to seriously consider whether civil society should play a larger role with the State moving out of many areas or modifying its role.

The emergence of Residents' Associations in the major urban areas of Kerala is an interesting example of new civil society organisations. All areas of the city are now self-organised into residents' associations that voluntarily undertake a number of activities for



common benefit. Only now the political parties are waking up to the new reality and are trying to infiltrate into these associations and their federations.

Kerala: Limits to the Welfare Model

Kerala's famous development model, which has delivered high human development and lowered poverty rates considerably, is facing a major crisis. The welfare-oriented governance is running out of steam due to a number of reasons.

The various state services including education and health have deteriorated due to a poor work culture, corruption and political interference. The transfer of control over a number of line departments to the *Panchayati Raj* institutions was intended to overcome this problem by giving the locals a stake in the management of Government institutions and services. Unfortunately, this has not clicked so far and the various services remain somewhat inefficient.

Finance to ensure the smooth functioning of the various welfare and social services is also a constraint given the limited tax base and the relatively large size of the Government.

Finally, with more people moving out of poverty, the relevance of maintaining a large public infrastructure for social welfare is being questioned. It often appears that maintaining jobs in the public sector is the rationale rather than the actual needs of the local population.

While the better-off can perhaps take care of themselves due to the increased availability of private sector services (schools, hospitals, etc.), the poor and the lower middle class do suffer from the decline in the quality of public services.

The fisherfolk and tribals continue to be distinct populations outside the mainstream with lower human development indices.

As far as the scheduled castes are concerned, though part of mainstream politics, they continue to lag behind in development. However, the peculiarities of Kerala politics have ensured that they have not emerged as a separate political group.

The NGO Role

The importance of the State in development in Kerala has meant that historically the NGOs have had a limited role or opportunity. Since the political system is highly responsive, it latches on to every new NGOs' idea that shows potential for success.

While various types of collaboration or co-existence are possible, the political system does not opt for such solutions and there is often unnecessary competition.

The NGOs are also weak in their ability to influence policy and come up with policy prescriptions to solve the many problems afflicting the state. They are more concerned with micro level interventions and have very little to offer at sectoral levels.

In conclusion, Kerala is in an interesting phase of its development wherein the earlier State-centred development paradigm is no more viable.

However, the increased role for civil society, which should be the logical corollary, is yet to be understood or appreciated while the NGOs continue to struggle despite their increased relevance.

For me, the residents' associations of Kerala offer a number of insights. I can see how in the developed countries like the US, local households got together to form their own systems of governance and then merged with other similar groups to form the towns, cities and states. This was clearly a bottom-up process of evolution of democratic governance.

However, in India we had for many historical reasons to go for a top-down imposition of democratic structures. As a result, we have a dual system in operation everywhere. On the one hand, we have informal and, at times, formal organisations that actually represent the people's own urges.

On the other hand, we have the formal state-linked systems of governance starting from *Panchayats*. In Kerala, the much touted *Panchayati Raj* intervention is an interesting example of how instead of people taking over local governance, it is just perceived as the Government coming closer to the people. The "we" and "they" syndrome is still very much in place.

Panchayati Raj is less about local self-government and more about deciding on whom the subsidies should reach.

There is obviously a lot that one can say about the State and its changing role in India.

We need to work out over time a civil society position on the role of the State in India.▶

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