

The Role of Governance in the Resolution of Socioeconomic and Political Conflict in India

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Calcutta Research Group's (CRG) study Within the CORE project was concerning "Governing Conflict and Peace-Building in India's Northeast and Bihar". It examined governance and peace-building initiatives adopted by the Indian government in India's northeast and Bihar. It involved extensive review of existing literature, including books, articles, government reports, manifestos and pamphlets of political parties and civil society organizations, multiple field visits, brainstorming sessions, and workshops involving core faculty members and other experts. The aim was to discuss the following themes in the context of India's North East and Bihar:

- a) The question of mode of governance and its relation with conflict management and the issue of peace;
- b) Features of the colonial mode of governance – continuities and discontinuities;
- c) Peace processes and peace accords;
- d) Territorial reorganisation (state reorganisations, creation of autonomous areas and homelands) and peace building;
- e) Political economy of development, social governance, and peace building;
- f) New subjects of developmental governance – women and other subjects

India's Northeast is a place, in some ways comparable to the Balkans, where the on-going protracted conflicts are myriad and multiple in nature. There is conflict between the state and societal groups, conflict among different ethnic groups sharing the same territorial space for centuries, as well as conflict between the union and state governments. To deal with this situation there are arrangements of federal administration, other institutional mechanisms for granting autonomy to the indigenous communities like the autonomous councils proposed in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Moreover, there have been peace initiatives as the ongoing peace talks of the Government of India with the insurgent groups like NSCN (I-M) and ULFA.

So far as Bihar is concerned, caste as we know has refused to vanish away from the society and politics of that state. Its capacity to impact politics and democracy in a dynamic manner speaks of its resilience as a category and as an institution. The history of the state is replete with innumerable instances of caste alliances, networks and mobilizations. Caste is the form in which claim as a significant interest group takes shape. The state and the government try to manage and administer caste in a manner whereby the ruling elite can gain legitimacy of its rule and enjoy the support of majority sections of the society. It was analyzed how caste as a political category has changed over the decades and how it has impacted the democratic polity. We have investigated the strategies of governing castes and caste relations during the recent times with the changing coalitions.

The study has already produced several publications. We are presenting here a brief summary of the outcome of CRG's research.

India inherited a colonial constitutional culture that does not mitigate conflicts or encourages dialogues, but gives a long rope to arbitrariness. Over the years, the colonial foundations of governance structures for peace building have been reinforced

and reshaped by the post-colonial experiences of democracy, but then have remained intact in India till date.

Modern governance structures emerged in India as part of the broader imperative of peace building, simply because the society that was to be governed, was ridden with conflicts and contradictions characteristic of colonial rule and thus marked with violence and an absence of social peace. Governing meant governing conflicts. Thus, from the day one, the main challenge in this specific grammar of governing a colonial country was in finding adequate forms of coping with various reactions and responses of the suppressed groups in society, who faced the problem of power of an alien sovereign. Hence bereft of legitimacy and representativeness, sovereign power had to always find a model of governance, which would inhere military efficacy, yet would retain civilian character.

In other words, colonialism's culture of governance hardly expired with the parcelling out of the world into independent nation-states. At least in India, colonial foundations are actively invoked to resolve conflicts and build peace. The colonial history of peacekeeping, pacification (colonial origins of extra-ordinary legislations), limited franchise, techniques of negotiations, divide and rule, borders and boundary-making exercises, and finally constitutionalism.

In short, peace-building in India is founded on the following uncertain political premises:

- (a) the state is strong;
- (b) conflicts may therefore be allowed to linger;
- (c) peace-building measures should not be initiated until a suitable moment arises;
- (d) the state's adversaries must be softened up through a mix of strong responses and delays in addressing demands;
- (e) peace accords work;
- (f) a limited grant of autonomy is the best solution; and
- (g) struggles for justice are in essence intergroup conflicts for parity.

One of the chief casualties of the aforesaid style of governance is the dialogic culture of society. The Indian society, like all societies, has dialogic aspects of its culture of conflict resolution. However, these dialogic aspects are not institutionalised in governance structures, or are to only limited extent. If we take up the need for legal pluralism — say, in matters of common property resources (CPR) or uniform civil code — we can see the need for research in this field in the interests of conflict resolution. Society needs legal pluralism, while the governmental recipe may be Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, with regard to the Common Property Resources (CPR). Or, let us take the theme of peace accords — one of the main features of the conflict resolution scenario in India which form the middle-ground in a 'no-war-no-peace' situation. These sites of dialogues need further investigation.

There is also the critical need to study how peace accords become a part of the governance tool kit. Charles Tilly viewed "war-making as a part of state-making exercise". In India, on the contrary, we need to investigate how peace-making feeds into the state-making agendum. The processes and structures of governance — the science of governing conflicts — need to be re-interrogated. In the development of this 'science', global trends are marshalled and implemented to grapple with local particularities. Similarly, restoration of government machinery has also a global model, though it has been a huge failure globally. The discourse of anti-terrorism again is a global discourse. Even thirty years ago, the governments used to acknowledge poverty, inequality, and injustice as causes of conflicts. Now all

insurgents are terrorists, all agitators are enemies of development, and all dissenters are enemies of national integration. Visits of counter-insurgent experts are regular features.

In this sense, governance policies in India today carry the mark of politics of globalisation. Similarly, the civil society networks learn from each other; rebellions, too, learn reciprocally; and alternative policies of friendship, too, are a mark of the times. We have in the sub-continent the case of Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Friendship (PIPFPD). But, the fact is that the divide between the world of dialogues and that of rule is too much. Governments rarely learn from dissents. This has to be remedies if effective policymaking must proceed.

Mindless importations of models of conflict resolution from Europe or elsewhere may not always be useful; rather a critical comparative approach is valuable. The divide between the governments and dissenters is as true of India as of Europe. There is, in that sense, no classic "European" archetype, as possibly there can be no "Indian" archetype. Diversity of conflicts and diversity of approaches (think of two different approaches to the Balkan problem and the Irish one in Europe, and the two different approaches to conflict with regard to Maoists and Hindu fundamentalists in India). Yet it is true that these diverse approaches finally feed into a grid of power exercising through what is known as "democratic channels". This is where we may find commonality, namely studying how democracy manages and governs conflicts.

A recognition that conflict prevention depends on gender equality and a commitment to respect individual citizen's rights notwithstanding their race/religion/caste/colour is also necessary. Coupled with this, there needs to be a true commitment to non-violence. India's Northeast, in particular, has shown how women groups — the Meira Paibes or the Naga Mothers — have played a critically important role in bridging a three-way gap between the government, the insurgent groups, and the civilian community at large. As such, funding and technical assistance for the implementation of existing national gender strategies, policies and plans of action, especially for women's economic empowerment, should be increased significantly. Security organs of the state — the face of the state, so to speak, in conflict resolution — are extremely masculine, such as the Indian Peacekeeping forces. Regular gender-sensitisation and training programmes for the security forces is necessary. Research should be undertaken to study the customary laws of different indigenous communities and look for codifying laws that are most respectful of women.

The civil-society groups and other activist groups and grassroots organization in conflict-prone areas need to be supported and not merely groups who are only visible in metropolitan zones. Emphasis on awareness/knowledge, advocacy, capacity-building, and programme design and implementation with focus on economic empowerment is also necessary.

To sum it up, the Indian nation is constantly mutating by changing forms, reforming, and renewing. This is possible because of new inclusionary and exclusionary strategies. Further, Indian democracy is marked by a grey theme of 'no-war-no-peace'. These two features of the Indian situation suggest a necessary agenda for further research into conflict and governance.