The path towards a pluralist civil society

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During the inaugural session of the new Parliament, controversy erupted after Members were gifted copies of the Indian Constitution, wherein the Preamble appeared to have dispensed with the terms 'Socialist' and 'Secular'.

Interestingly, the civil society debate that followed remained hemmed in on whether either of these terms defined the true spirit of the Constitution. Without going into the merits of that debate, there is a largely unaddressed facet to point out; one which ought to comprise the basis of any such deliberative inquiry: the meaning of the opening words of the Preamble, 'We the People'.

The meaning or character of our popular sovereignty is often treated as a convenient myth or as a purely abstract assumption in our civil society discussions. Yet, as constitutional scholar Sarbani Sen argued in her book, *The Constitution of India: Popular Sovereignty and Democratic Transformations*, the revolutionary potential of the Constitution inheres in this very spirit of popular sovereignty. She looks at 'how the idea of popular sovereignty and its relation to constitutionalism developed as a result of inter-generational discourse in Indian political thought during the pre-founding colonial period'.

One can interpret the enactment of the Constitution as the culmination of a decades-long process of dialogue among contending political actors, wherein an important part of it focused on the character of the envisaged republic. The Preamble explicitly anchors the legitimising ends of the republic in terms of securing justice (social, economic and political), liberty (of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship), and equality (of status and of opportunity) to all Indian citizens.

When we reduce sovereignty of the "political community" to mere state sovereignty, we reduce the constitutional promises given above to vague aspirations floating in ether. The Constitution can only remain a living force in our democracy as long as the phrase, 'we the people', can somehow approximate to a discerning citizenry, which effectively discharges its agency as vigilant participants.

The elite versus non-elite spheres

The western tradition of civil society tended to grant such a watchdog function, of counterbalancing the state's drive to monopolise sovereign power, to an elite public sphere. Counterbalancing the state implies constraining the excesses of government power. This liberal public sphere (as described by theorists such as Jürgen Habermas), platformed the educated middle classes, held to be engaged in a rational discourse centred on individual autonomy and self-interest.

The English language arena in India, particularly in journalism and civil society activism, reflexively borrowed from this western discourse the directing role of a modernising elite. Further, the normative assumptions underlying the question "who constitutes this modernising elite?" served to redouble the hold of the traditional elites on the public sphere. Broadly, the public sphere, tended to privilege the views of segments that skewed male, upper class and dominant castes.

Yet, this elite public sphere has largely remained inert in the face of severe challenges to prevailing constitutional governance.

Indeed, the more forceful democratic claims to the mantle of popular sovereignty have emanated from what we can term as the non-elite counter-sphere. This is the counter sphere of 'organisations and movements': social movements, farmers and labour groups, human rights activists, subaltern caste and tribal movements and their powerful examples such as the Una agitation by Dalits against caste-based violence; the Pathalgadi movement of tribals in Jharkhand; the farmers' movements of Punjab and Haryana; and the nation-wide protests by Muslims (led by women) against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Often, the liberal public sphere, even while being empathetic towards these movements, seeks to cast them in the subordinate role of 'sectional movements' or emotional/irrational upsurges, which can at the most merit conditional support. Yet, if we refuse to accord these counter sphere political actors a position of complete equality within our civil society, we will lose the liberatory potential of these 'radically democratic' forms of popular assertions and mass protests.

Ambedkar's framing

B.R. Ambedkar had framed the Preamble in terms of heralding a "way of life, which recognizes liberty, equality, and fraternity as the principles of life and which cannot be divorced from each other: Liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative".

Equally, he refused to harbour naive presumptions about the self-perpetuating character of these constitutional principles. In his essay, 'Buddha and the future of religion', he wrote, Buddha also "did not believe that law can be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality...In all societies, law plays a very small part. It is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline." Since the majority is constrained not by law but by morality, Ambedkar held that "religion, in the sense of morality, must therefore, remain the governing principle in every society".

It might be instructive to juxtapose Ambedkar's plea for a transcendent civil morality with Gandhi's conception of swaraj or 'self-rule'. In the monograph, Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance (2016), historian Ajay Skaria explains that 'Swaraj' for Gandhi did not confine itself to a mechanistic self-rule, but a creative process of self-realisation through which one might reach out towards a more secure and substantive plane of freedom and equality. The means to achieve Swaraj was thus 'satyagraha' (defined as "truth force" and "love force"). "For him (Gandhi), sovereign power is not exemplified only in the state. Rather, every self is deeply fissured, and sovereignty is ubiquitous, always exercised everyday by the self," Skaria wrote.

Therefore, Gandhi's practice of 'ahimsa' cannot be divorced from his insistence on recognising a deeply fissured self. The politically fabricated wholeness or boundedness accorded to the self (whether 'Hindu Self' or 'Muslim Self'), mirroring the colonising Europe's axioms of national sovereignty, has led to much bloodshed in the subcontinent in the last century.

The folly of mimicking the imperialists' arrogance wrecked other countries as well, not least the militaristic Japan of the first half of the 20th century. The book, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (1995), uncovers how Japanese violent militarism was built on the fundamental assumption of a perfected modern self. This construction of this supremely confident self necessitated the reflexive displacement of the western Orientalist category of a 'backward Other' from itself onto other subordinated peoples. According to Tanaka, Japan's historians constructed their own backward Orient, defined by the "Asiatic culture... Asiatic nature was characterized by its gentleness, moral ethics, harmony, and communalism; Japan's genius lay in its ability to adapt creatively only those Asiatic characteristics that were harmonious with its own nature; and Japan thus became the possessor of the best of Asia".

Having the right dialogue

It becomes clear that a progressive civil society in India can only be a plural civil society, if it is structured on the free and equal participation of every community. Regarding any particular community as socially backward or intellectually inferior (compared to any assumed authentic 'self') inevitably skids into perilously unexamined pride.

The path towards a pluralist civil society must, thus, be forged through honest and introspective dialogue. This is not the shallow but the commonplace mode of dialogue – a form of debate focused on achieving a framework of objectively correct knowledge. But the particular form of dialogue stressed by Gandhi, Ambedkar and modern theorists of deliberative democracy seeks to understand the position of the 'other'. It is through this empathetic engagement with the concerns and the world views of 'others' that we can build a stable foundation of mutual self-understanding, thus opening up possibilities for genuine solidarity. The alternative is a civil society with little self-knowledge beyond chauvinistic pride, and little agency beyond being the handmaiden of an increasingly authoritarian state.

> The alternative is to have a civil society that functions as the handmaiden of an authoritarian state

Micro-credentials, the next chapter in higher education

Higher education institutes (HEIs) in India must play a much more active role in ensuring that students become employable by connecting them with the careers and job opportunities of tomorrow. This is because there is a gap between the knowledge that students acquire in HEIs and the knowledge they must have in order to become employable.

Micro-credentials are emerging as a disruptive way of bridging this gap to acquire 'just-in-time' modern skills and competencies. They are evolving as the new normal in higher education due to their flexibility, accessibility, and advantages. It must be noted that hiring practices are also changing, with a tendency to prioritise skills over degrees, and the endorsement of micro-credentials is on the rise.

The essence of micro-credentials

What are micro-credentials? They are short-duration learning activities with proof of specific learning outcomes that are validated through a standard and reliable assessment process. Micro-credentials are offered in online, physical, or hybrid modes at various levels, such as beginning, intermediate, or advanced. In contrast to micro-credentials, students must study for several years to obtain macro-credentials such as undergraduate degrees. In addition, micro-credentials can also be designed for life-long learners, i.e., working professionals who may not be able to attend a formal degree programme in a university.

Micro-credentials, as a path to life-long learning, are still developing. An obvious sign of this is how assorted terminologies, such as digital badges, micro-master degrees, nano-degrees, and online certificates, are being used for this short-duration learning.

Multiple players such as Atingi, Alison.com, Credly, Coursera, edX, FutureLearn, Google, Linkedin, Microsoft, PwC and Udacity offer micro-credentials. Many universities in Australia, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States are also engaged in providing

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Higher education institutes in India can be the catalysts in integrating micro-credentials with existing academic programmes

micro-credentials. More organisations are expected to join this growing club.

In formal degree programmes conducted by HEIs, 'credits' are used to assign value to different forms of learning – lectures, tutorials, laboratory work, seminars, projects, internships and so on. In such macro-credential programmes, courses are generally designed to be of three to four credits, and one credit corresponds to one hour of lecture or two hours of lab work per week. Therefore, in conventional educational programmes, 'credit' is associated with the time spent in a classroom or a lab.

However, in micro-credentials, the trend is to associate the credit with the notional hours spent acquiring a defined minimum competency. As this makes micro-credential credits consistent with those in conventional higher education, they can be universally validated and recognised.

Regardless of this, what is required is clear quality benchmarking and a regulation of these micro-credentials to prevent significant divergences in learning outcomes and facilitate their easy endorsement in the workplace and higher education institutes.

India now has a National Credit Framework (NCrF), which spells out learning outcomes and corresponding credits a student should accumulate in order to progress to the next level of learning. One of the primary benefits of micro-credentials is that they are portable and stackable on a digital platform such as the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC).

Fostering trust is a key step

To ensure that micro-credentials denote a genuine acquisition of skills, they must be aligned with higher education standards in the areas of delivery, assessment, grading and the awarding of qualifications. Our capacity to devise reliable assessment methods is critical in fostering trust in micro-credentials, and in this task, the association of HEIs is of great importance.

For students in Indian universities, micro-credentials can open up opportunities in integrating diverse skills as a part of their regular education, or they can store the credits on the ABC platform for redemption later or to get a separate certificate or diploma in addition to their macro-credentials. Depending on the duration and learning outcomes, micro-credentials can be given as between one to five credit short modules. Or, learners can accumulate multiple short modules to earn the total number of credits required to obtain a degree as specified in the NCrF.

There is much potential

As the NCrF is being implemented across the country, it is the right time for Indian HEIs to plan to develop micro-credentials in partnership with industry. The NCrF offers an opportunity for HEIs to examine the development of credit-based micro-credentials as a part of regular degree programmes. Broader deliberations must take place on the potential impact of micro-credentials and the additional value they can create in the tertiary education system.

Is there enough demand for micro-credentials in India? With the focus of the National Education Policy 2020 on providing skilled education to students right from school to the higher levels, and with employers looking for young employees with adequate skills and competencies to boost productivity, learners are increasingly viewing micro-credentials as a value-added advantage. Therefore, millions of students could be looking to earn micro-credentials either as stand-alone credits or as a component of their standard higher education.

Indian HEIs must serve as agents of transformation and consider introducing micro-credentials a vital element of their strategic institutional objectives. Further to this, regulators and HEIs must work towards harmonising micro-credentials with existing academic programmes by coming up with clear validation metrics.

The views expressed are personal