Negotiating Power over Human Bodies: Populism, People and the Politics of Health in Delhi

Subhadra Mitra Channa
(University of Delhi, India)
Channa.subhadra@gmail.com

Introduction

In this article, I foreground the political scenario in contemporary India following upon the nuanced and intricate discursive intellectual space created by Pardo and Prato though a series of closely sequenced publications (Pardo 2012; Pardo and Prato 2019, 2021) to interrogate the concepts of legitimacy enjoyed by power holders in the modern democracies. Chatterjee (2011: 8) has cited the philosopher Ian Hacking, who distinguishes between two meanings of 'norm'. The first in the general sense of what is right and good; the other in the statistical sense of what is the most commonly occurring and accepted state of affairs in a particular region or culture. Many power regimes take recourse to the latter in order to please the majority. The power of the 'norm-exception' is widely operative to accommodate 'co-cultural' conditions between the ruler and the ruled and also to 'establish a working relationship between formal law and people's cultural requirements' (Pardo and Prato 2019: 2). The formation of the Hindu right-wing regime in India, is directly rooted in this principle, critiquing the secular and formal constitution of the country and its legal system, as being influenced by western and not indigenous values. However, in the effort to create an unanimously accepted legitimacy for its rule the regime is facing problems because it is almost impossible to obtain a consensus on values and norms in a diverse and multicultural society like India — more so as Hinduism is not a doctrinal religion and has at best a fragile bedrock of consensus on what is meant to be a Hindu (Channa 2017). Even the propagator of the concept of Hindutva, Savarkar, did not link it to religion but to a geo-political identity (Walsh 2011: 201; Jaffrelot 1996: 28). Brass (1994: 23) points to Gandhi's use of 'transcendent Hindu symbols' to overcome the internal dissensions among Hindus. The Hindutva identity is, therefore, more effectively built as an oppositional identity to the demonised 'other'; primarily the Muslim, but now extending to other non-Hindus. But, again, the number of Indians subscribing to it is far from being a majority.

Under stress from an extraordinary calamity like the Covid-19 pandemic, the dissenters find legitimate avenues for expression as exemplified by the political turmoil during the pandemic. The failure of the state to protect those for whom it is responsible leads to increasing questioning of its authority. The material on which this paper is based is largely auto-ethnographical, based on my experiences as a citizen of Delhi and as one who experienced the Covid-19 pandemic at first hand in the city.

Legitimacy of the Ruler

The present right-wing regime of the Bhartiya Janata Party (hereby referred to as the BJP) came to power professing to model itself on ancient Hindu traditions and glory, as a religious nationalism (Thapar 2002: 21). The Hindutva movement shows ideological affinity to populism in that it showed 'hostility to the status quo, mistrust of traditional politicians, appeal to the people and not to classes and anti-intellectualism' (Laclau 1977: 147). It would, however, be wrong to presume that its legitimacy draws on religious identity alone. It actually derives from a combination of various factors that include disillusionment with the dynastical rule of the family of Indira Gandhi, widespread corruption in the public sphere and the lack of fit of the modern secular model followed by the Indian constitution with the majority of Indians, who are still steeped in feudal and parochial values. But no political regime in India can claim itself to represent the majority on religious/cultural grounds. The only goals and values that can actually cut across Indian society are those based on instrumental and immediate needs, including food, water, clean environment and health.

Being well aware of these conditions, the central government floated a number of projects to support the 'liberal' and universal image of the regime, and especially that of the popular Prime Minister. Health and well-being were identified as goals that would appeal to practically everyone. Among the various catchy slogans distributed for consumption to the general public, one was, *Sab ka Saath, Sabka Vikas* — meaning, 'we want everyone to work together for everyone's development'; another was, *Banega Swasth India* — meaning 'India will become healthy'. A strongly projected slogan — *Swatch Bharat Abhiyan* ('The Clean India Campaign') — was launched with great intensity but the actual policies and their implementation fell short of such intensity. The main spanners in the implementation were inequality and poverty, lack of infrastructural facilities and poor distribution.

At the beginning of the pandemic, in February 2020, India was among those nations that quickly announced a lockdown, even before the cases had crossed into three figures. However, no attention was paid to the marginal, the poor, the daily wage workers, the cab drivers, the pavement-sellers, the migrant labour and those employed informally in the places that were shut down, like shops and restaurants, malls and gyms. The first phase was marked more by the sufferings caused by the lockdown than by the disease itself (Channa 2020). Globally, the visuals of hundreds of people walking on foot in the heat and dust of the Indian summer, trying to get back home, went viral in all media. At that time, the migrant issue was the real issue — much more serious than the virus. It is reported that more than 8,000 migrant workers, desperate to get home were mowed down by trains, as they walked along the train tracks so as not to lose their way during the hundred-of-miles trek to their villages. These were workers who had come to Delhi to earn a living from far flung less prosperous, areas with very little resources as compared to the city.

Elsewhere (Channa 2019), I have discussed under what conditions, the poor and the marginal are forced to leave their villages and small towns and migrate to the cities. The fate of these workers during the pandemic highlighted a blind spot in the vision of the state

about those that do not belong to the formal organised sector of the economy, those who exist on the fringes without any rights. At this juncture, it was civil society more than the state that came to the rescue. The state responded by passing formal laws such as that prescribing that no one could be evicted from their premises during the lockdown or that prescribing that employers must pay wages; but there was no way to implement these laws, especially at the lowest level. The failure of the state to protect the interests of the most vulnerable is also linked to the limited capacity of such people for political action. Thousands of people faced death due to starvation, fatigue and accidents on the roads, but they went without protest.

However, it was the deadly second phase of the pandemic, caused by the regimes' self-assertion and tendency to take credit for its 'stupendous work' during the first phase, that shook the faith of the people. Questions were raised about the legitimacy of the state, asking how it could make such monumental blunders. It is reported that between January 2021 and February 2021, India exported through donation and sale 60 million doses of the indigenously produced vaccines and gifted and otherwise distributed life-saving medicines to needy countries, notably its neighbours. But by March 2021, there was a complete turnaround of events. India developed a double mutant variety of the virus, now named 'Delta'. April 2021 saw numerous deaths caused by lack of oxygen supply in the city's premier hospitals; at times 50 to 60 patients died at the same time, as oxygen supply ran dry. It was in this period that I lost my only sister and a number of other family members and friends to the pandemic.

Hospitals had to shut their gates due to lack of beds and people died while waiting in ambulances or just waiting in their cars or on the roads. The rush at the cremation grounds was such that bodies had to queue up for disposal, the wait time stretching to 12 hours, at times. There were shocking stories that large numbers of bodies had been thrown into the river Ganga[1] by desperate relatives who could not afford to cremate them as price of all materials required for death rituals had begun to sky rocket. In other words, things had descended into chaos. This shook up the power lobby at the centre, and after the initial euphoria of having successfully dealt with the virus, there was silence for a while from the centre.

The disillusionment with the ruling regime was demonstrated by the BJP losing elections in several states where they were held in April 2020, at the peak of the pandemic. A miffed power centre became reluctant to help the states where it had lost power, as a political vendetta leading to further resentment. Fingers were also raised at the power centre for focusing attention on election campaigns and not putting a curb on the Kumbh Mela, a major Hindu festival held on the banks of the river Ganga at Haridwar. Both these actions were seen as related to the political aspirations of the powerholders with little regard for people's health.

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[1] Throwing dead bodies into the Ganga, when proper rituals cannot be performed is an age-old practice, as the river, considered as a goddess, is supposed to purify anything that is thrown in it. People float the dead bodies of their relatives in the Ganga, in the hope that they will attain salvation.

The Kumbh Mela was in fact shut down only when several major religious leaders became infected with the virus. Citing situational contingency, the religious leaders left the Kumbh Mela as the right thing to do at the right time. But by then a lot of damage had been done and, as the people returned to their villages and towns, they brought back the virus with them. Yet, there was no blame at this time. Unlike the demonization of the event organized by the Tablighi Jamaat — a Muslim movement — where about 3,000 people had congregated in March 2020, an assembly of a 150,000 people performing rituals and bathing on the banks of the river with practically no precautions was not proclaimed as a super spreader; in fact, most news channels and media kept a total silence over the issue. The Islamic congregation had been widely condemned during the first phase of the pandemic.

With chaos and suffering everywhere, people had no other enemy to turn to, except the state. The anger was mostly directed towards the centre, for breach of promises, the inability to assess the future of the virus and for ignoring advice from knowledgeable sources. The head of the virology advisory committee resigned on the grounds that his repeated advice was ignored by those making decisions. This resignation was not broadcast by most of the Indian media; a few stations broadcast this news on international television only. Instead of trying to mitigate the situation, the government engaged in a game of covering up and reverse propaganda (*The Statesman*, June 2021) in an attempt to put the blame on the states, especially where there was a non-BJP government. But much of this misfired.

By January 2021, India had its own indigenously-manufactured vaccine, yet miscalculations by the centre cost a large number of people their lives. This particular lack of judgment on part of the leaders, brought down their legitimacy in the eyes of the people. According to the Hindu worldview, the ruler is like a parent to his/her people. Rulers should care for the lives and welfare of the people who depend on them. A serious breach of this principle occurred when the state decided to earn a name for itself internationally; that is, when it allowed large amounts of resources, much needed in the country itself, to move to the outside. This is one key instance where trust was lost, as so many people were hit where it hurt the most, the loss of loved ones.

To Conclude: How Legitimate is the Present Regime? And for Whom?

In several essays, Pardo (e.g., 2012) argues that legitimacy has a dynamic nature and cannot be separated from the ongoing social processes of which it is only a part or a reflection. Prior to the pandemic, the right-wing BJP government had staked its legitimacy on the basis of 'faith' over 'rationality' and of religion above equalitarianism. It advocated both upper caste supremacy and patriarchy, under the garb of following Hindu dharma and a Hindu nationalism based on identity and self-pride. It managed to disguise its partisan attitude by showcasing paradigms such as 'development' and removal of corruption. However, although apparently very transparent and rational, these transformations hit, and were probably meant to hit, the poor and the marginal. The state was obviously driven by a corporate and pro-upper-class agenda disguised under progress, development and the removal of corruption.

With the pandemic, the scenario changed considerably. The virus cut across caste, class, religion and all other social divisions; so, it became impossible to have a hidden agenda that would be pro-upper caste and class and also be effective in controlling the pandemic. Although in the first phase there were attempts to shift the blame on the category of 'others'; such as Muslims, such machinations failed completely when the pandemic hit a peak and affected a very large proportion of the population. It was no longer something that happens to others, it was something that was happening to practically every one, very close to their own bodies and those of their loved ones. Legitimacy could not be derived from ideological rhetoric or from empty signifiers, people were expecting concrete action.

The OECD has identified four major parameters for identifying the legitimacy of a state (Pardo and Prato 2019: 2). The third is 'shared beliefs', it presumes common beliefs, religion and charismatic leadership as leading to a 'shared political community' of the ruler and ruled, which is problematic in a widely differentiated and plural society like India. Here, several religions co-exist, and there are numerous sub-divisions in the major Hindu religion, which also professes that all paths lead to the same truth. There is also a globalized, cosmopolitan and liberal civil society that stakes claim to common humanitarianism and seeks legitimacy to rule by performative characters and adherence to legal norms. This section of Indian society also invokes a humanitarian and inclusive version of Hinduism. Importantly, the textual religious ideology that is the backbone of the right-wing regime invokes the ideal ruler as just, equalitarian and responsible. The failure ultimately to protect the people against the pandemic was seen as a loss of legitimacy to rule, both in terms of a rational-legal model of instrumentality and a model of ideal ruler as derived from the sacred texts of Hinduism.

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