Federalism and Consociationalism in India

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The concept and implication of a federal form of governance is becoming increasingly important and relevant in the modern world. From the domestic management of large states with notable socio-cultural differences to the formation of international bodies and systems. Federalism would appear to be the solution to mankind's quest for an egalitarian and just system of governance.[1] However, as R. Kahn argues; "democratic systems permit – and even promote – people's right of dissent."[2] If the federal and consociational approach is particularly useful as a form of organising the political and cultural life of citizens in multiethnic societies, then the permitted right of descent is surely a dangerous and volatile aspect of it.[3] India is a classic plural society and a massive federal polity and as such is especially relevant as a case study if one hopes to discover the implications of federalism and consociationalism on ethnically diverse societies.[4]

The Democratic Republic of India was formed in 1950 and is today's largest, most heterogeneous democracy.[5] It is the subject of great consternation amongst consociationalists who argue that democracy can only be successfully upheld in deeply divided societies if power-sharing exists in some shape or form. Yet with regards to India, one can see a clearly majoritarian system of governance with power concentrated in one main party.[6] However, despite initial appearances, India does exhibit all four defining characteristics of power sharing found in the other examples of consociational systems.[7] It is simply that India's status as the most complex federal democracy, with no other federal polity encompassing so many sub-national identities,[8] necessitates an almost informal form of consociationalism. A broad swathe of the populace is represented by the (dominant) Congress Party which sits in the centre of the political spectrum. Despite never winning a clear majority of the popular vote, the inclusive nature of the Congress Party has generated an ad hoc coalition within the cabinet, with the majority of the religious, linguistic and regional groups represented.[9] While this argument is championed as an example of consociationalism by A. Lijphart,[10] there are others such as P. Brass [11] who would argue otherwise. The importance of determining whether India is an example of a federal consociational government is vital if one is to use India as an example to either promote or disprove the suggestion that federalism and consociational forms of governance are undemocratic and dysfunctional.

I think that the arguments put forward by both A. Lijphart and S. I. Wilkinson would suggest that while there are certainly no formal, constitutional arrangements for a clear consociational government, in practice the distribution of ministerships in a proportional fashion[12] and that the dominant Congress Party accorded linguistic and religious minorities a veto over important religious and social legislation created a clear consociational arrangement.[13] Indeed a consociational arrangement of governance would appear to be ideally suited to India. The numerically superior Hindu population are internally divided to such an extent that the country consists of minorities only.[14] Thus limiting the chance of a majority understandably preferring a form of majoritarian rule. The socio-economic differences between ethnic groups, while certainly apparent, are overshadowed by much greater differences within those same ethnic groups, thus preventing a single, socio-economic "elite" to form.

If one accepts that India is in some form or another governed by a federal consociationalist arrangement, then the evidence points towards some disturbing possibilities that go against the expected outcomes of such an arrangement. Admittedly statistics on ethnic violence are difficult to accurately obtain in a full and unbiased nature as the prime source is India's Home Ministry.[15] The quantitative figures collected by Varshney & Wilkinson however, illustrate that ethnic violence has intensified since the 1960s;[16] this has been broadly accepted by scholars.[17]

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Thus, Wilkinson argues that "periods in which India has been consociational or increasingly consociationalist have been more violent than when India was a ranked state."[18] I think that one of the reasons behind this, which Wilkinson fails to adequately explore, is that minorities are multidimensional. By this I mean that the different ethnic groupings within India are in themselves very stratified. Political power for the elites in Punjab will not necessarily pacify those lower down the social hierarchy. India's history as a civilisation defined by castes[19] denotes a clear stratification even within social groupings, thus undermining the effectiveness of any attempt to politically include or give state resources to, minorities. Within India for example, much of the state benefits for the ex-untouchable 'grouping' goes to a few, relatively wealthy, educated sub-castes such as the Malas, Mahars and Chamars.[20] Indeed, with regards to linguistic federalism Lipjhart argues that, "linguistic federalism has not fully satisfied the minorities' desire for autonomy and security."[21] It is clearly understandable that the minorities within minorities feel victimised and overlooked, their differences strengthened rather than lessened. This context of shifting sub-groupings and minorities within minorities has failed to be addressed by the consociationalist argument. In 1995 Lijphart suggests the solution to be a form of regular elections by proportional representation, whereby groups may define themselves however they wish.[22] But in the case of India, are groups which already receive allocated state benefits and benefit from ethnic quotas going to be willing to forsake these benefits for emerging minorities? With the minority-veto which is apparent in consociational theory and India it seems somewhat unlikely. Wilkinson agrees with this deduction, arguing that "aggrieved groups will be tempted to turn to non-constitutional means. They will use violence… to raise the costs to the veto-holders."[23]

India also brings to the forefront the apparent assumption that is apparent in consociational theory, mainly that minority leaders are both representative of, and are supported by those that they represent. In India I would argue that this is practically impossible. As an example I would point to the 1985 incident in Gujarat state, where affirmative-action initiatives that had been introduced by the upper and middle caste leaders in an attempt to gain the support of the lower caste Hindus, led to violent demonstrations. Indeed there is in the majority of cases, a distinct lack of incentive for ethnic leaders to be moderate towards one another. D. Horowitz argues that in the case of Sri Lanka, "intraethnic party competition had produced a politics of outbidding on ethnic demands that made reconciliation difficult."[24] This phenomenon is not unique to Sri Lanka and can be seen in effect in India as well. As the electorate is no longer almost exclusively upper-caste, upper-caste politicians are having to appeal to the lower and middle castes. Wilkinson argues that this is done in the case of the Hindu population by "highlight[ing] the anti-Muslim wedge issues."[25] Thus increasing the likelihood of violent demonstration.

This illustrates most aptly the inappropriateness of the consociational model when it is exported to countries outside Europe. Lijphart attributes the success of consociationalism in divided societies within Europe due to the "cooperation by leaders of different groups which transcends the segmental and sub-cultural cleavages."[26] In India, as I have already demonstrated, this is extremely difficult. Indeed, Val R. Lorwin agrees with this when he argues that "segmented pluralism" of the smaller European democracies differ significantly from politics based upon "cleavages of caste, communalism, race, or even language"[27] As is the case in India. However, India is still a functional state, despite the resurgence of violence since the 1960s. The federal organization of India along with the ad hoc consociational measures can certainly not be overlooked with regards to explaining the continued democratic existence of India. Indeed arguably it is not consociationalism itself which has led to a resurgence of violence in India, but instead a further centralization of government. The increasing use of the 'President's Rule' to undermine democratically elected state governments led to a decrease of individual state's authority and importance.[28] Lijphart gives the figures that 'President's Rule' was invoked only ten times prior to 1967 but sixty-six times between 1969 and 1989.[29] This then begs the question as to why this shift has occurred. One possible reason must be the change from Jawaharlal Nehru to Indira Gandhi with the latter clearly advocating a much more centralized form of governance with diminishing state powers. Lijpharts assessment that the Congress Party under Indira Gandhi was transformed from an "internally democratic, federal and consensual organization to a centralized and hierarchical party"[30] would suggest that Indira Gandhi's impact on consociationalism in India was dramatic and undermined the very basis from which it was built; the Congress Party. This in itself, rather than being an individual's ideology, is more likely to be a response to the growing pressure from below which makes it increasingly difficult to maintain broad support for a party explicitly committed to power-sharing and promoting the rights of the minority.

Consociational power-sharing does have a role to play during the transitional period from authoritarian rule (in India's

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case, colonial rule) to democratic governance, in order to safeguard minority groups. However, I feel that long term solutions, other than the current consociational ones are necessary for deeply divided societies. The consociational method currently employed exacerbates cleavages between ethnic groups rather than addressing them. As factions within factions attempt to attain ever more representation, the status-quo is no longer acceptable, thus bringing under threat the legitimacy of long-term success when using the current consociational method. Federalism and Consociationalism are neither undemocratic nor dysfunctional as is illustrated by India in the periods directly after independence. It is however, the ultimate nature of consociationalism when applied to a vast, ethnically diverse country with many cleavages to eventually undermine itself. True consociationalism would require representation for every minority, which in India's case is simply impossible with the current system of governance. The ideal solution would be that advocated by Mukarji and Arora[31] described as "cascading federalism"[32] whereby there would be three levels of federalism in which each state would become a federation of the minorities within itself. I think that India does not promote the idea that federalism and consociationalism is undemocratic or dysfunctional, it merely highlights the problems which arise from exporting a model successful in Europe to a much more fundamentally divided society. India does not need further centralization but instead a more aggressive and complete form of consociationalism in order to minimize violence and ethnic tension.

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[1] For further explanation as to the importance and relevance of Federalism in the modern context see; R. Khan, *Federal India; A Design for Change,* (New Delhi, 1992) pp. 4-5.

[2] Ibid. p. 24.

[3] G. Smith, *Federalism, The Multiethnic Challenge,* (New York, 1995) p. 3.

[4] And thus by extension whether they are 'dysfunctional and undemocratic.'

[5] A. Lijphart, 'The puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation' in *American Political Science Review.* Vol. 90, No.2. p. 258.

[6] Namely the 'congress party.' See; Ibid. p. 260.

[7] Ibid. p. 259.

[8] R. Khan, op cit. pp. 21-23.

[9] A. Lijphart, op cit. p. 260.

[10] Ibid.

[11] See; P. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism; Theory and Comparison,* (New Delhi, 1991) pp. 333-348.

[12] Lijphart writes that Indian cabinets have accorded ministerships "*remarkably close to proportionality*" including the Muslim minority, Sikh minority and the "*different linguistic groups, states and regions of the country.*" A. Lijphart, op cit. p. 261.

[13] See; Ibid. 258-260 & S. I. Wilkinson, 'India, Consociational Theory and Ethnic Violence,' in *Asian Survey,* Vol. 40. No. 5. pp. 769-770.

[14] A. Lijphart, op cit. 262.

[15] S. I. Wilkinson, op cit. p. 784.

[16] Ibid. pp. 787 – 788.

[17] P. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence,* (New York, 1990) chps. 6 & 7. and A. Kohli,*Democracy and Discontent: India's growing crisis of governability,* (New York, 1990) pp. 6-15.

[18] S. I. Wilkinson, op cit. p. 786.

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[19] N. D. Palmer, *The Indian Political System,* (Boston, 1971) pp. 13-14.

[20] S. I. Wilkinson, op cit. p. 787.

[21] A. Lijphart, op cit. p. 260.

[22] S. I. Wilkinson, op cit. p. 788.

[23] Ibid, p. 789.

[24] D. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict,* (Los Angeles, 1985) p. 357.

[25] S. I. Wilkinson, op cit. p. 790.

[26] A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies,* (New Haven, 1977) p. 16.

[27] V. R. Lorwin, 'Segmented Pluralism: Ideological Cleavages and Political Cohesion in the Smaller European Democracies', in *comparative politics. (1971) Vol 3 No. 2* p. 35.

[28] A. Lijphart (1996), op cit. p. 264.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] N. Mukarji & A. Balveer 'Conclusion: Restructuring Federal Democracy' in N. Mukarji & A. Balveer (Eds) *Federalism in India: Origins and Development.* (New Delhi, 1992) p. 270.

[32] A. Lijphart (1996), op cit. p. 266.

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