The Declining Power of Caste Hierarchies and

Abram de Swaan's Concept of a "Social Consciousness"

by James Manor
[james.manor@sas.ac.uk]

The conference in Shimla in June 2011 will focus on the declining power of caste hierarchies in rural India and its wider implications for the interactions of social groups, for politics, for state-society relations, and for public policy. One possible set of implications may connect to Abram de Swaan's important work on state formation and the emergence of (i) welfare state provisions in Western Europe and North America, and of (ii) what he calls a "social consciousness" in the West. (He will be with us in Shimla.)

What does he mean by the term "social consciousness"? He sees it as

> ...an awareness of the generalization of interdependence which links all members within a national collectivity, coupled with an abstract sense of responsibility which does not impel to personal action, but requires the needy in general to be taken care of by the state out of public funds. [1]

Elsewhere he describes it as an "awareness of the increasingly intensive and extensive chains of interdependence, coupled with a willingness to contribute to remedies for the adversities and deficiencies that affect others...". He sees it as "a cognitive state" which "implies an understanding of remote and long-term social consequences". But it is also "a moral stance" since "It entails a sense of generalized responsibility".[2]

We need to consider two questions about this. How widely – at elite and mass levels -- has this set of ideas been accepted in India? And how, and to what extent, has the declining power of caste hierarchies contributed to the acceptance of these ideas?

De Swaan argues that in the West, the spread of a "social consciousness" among elites occurred in part as a result of "anxieties and expectations aroused by the poor" – including the idea that "the poor may threaten their (elites') security, *if* conditions are not improved". But "'marginal groups' represent not only danger but opportunity... as a 'segment of the consumer market', a cohort to be recruited, and a 'vote' to be wooed".[3] In the Indian context, votes may be the most crucial concern, but we also hear from people in the private sector

---

[1] A. de Swaan, *In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988) p. 10.
[2] *Ibid.,* p. 253.
[3] *Ibid.,* pp. 252-53.

(and from economists whom I have interviewed in the Planning Commission) praise for India's new poverty programmes because they may convert the poor into consumers.

I cannot entirely summarise de Swaan's rich, complex arguments here, but a few points are worth noting. He examines the transition in the West from a preoccupation with personalised charity (including the work of voluntary associations) to "institutional interventions on the part of full-time administrative and professional experts" working for the state. He adds that this transition

> implies the silent consent to a considerable tax-burden and to a redistribution of income which affects the vertical differences (in society) only slightly, but those between generations, between sexes and between the active and non-active significantly. This social consciousness also provides a permanent and pervasive legitimation for claims of indemnification, reimbursement and assistance, the more so where the apparatus and the resources appear to be effective and available.[4]

The question for us is not whether or not a "social consciousness" exists in India – some people have clearly developed it – but <u>how widely</u> this set of perceptions has been accepted. It is important to add that if we conclude that a "social consciousness" has not yet gained wide currency, this would not be a damning judgement on India. As de Swaan has written, the process leading to its emergence in the West occurred "In the course of several centuries...".[5] And in research related to this theme, three of us came to suspect that it had achieved broad acceptance in only one country in Asia, Africa and Latin America: Brazil -- and there, only since the late 1980s or early 1990s.[6]

It is not clear, however, whether the evidence from India enables us to connect recent trends there (including the declining power of caste hierarchies) to the emergence of a "social consciousness". Indeed, it is not clear that a "social consciousness" has emerged in strength in India. We might consider that in Shimla. To facilitate that discussion, let me set out an argument that <u>might</u> serve as a map which could lead us from the decline of caste hierarchies to de Swaan's concerns. Others at the conference may disagree with what follows, but that is welcome since it will open these themes up more fully.

The text below includes many comments that are extremely familiar to India specialists, so that readers who are new to the topic will grasp the arguments. I apologise to specialists. Let me briefly summarise what many attending the conference already understand. We have known since the mid-1990s, from field research by scholars, that the power of caste hierarchies has declined in rural India where it had long been strong. Evidence from this comes from several different regions, so it is a national trend. The change is uneven, but it is widespread. 'Caste' has increasingly come to denote <u>difference</u> more than <u>hierarchy</u>. One

---

[4] *Ibid*., p.255.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[6] M.A. Melo, N. Ng'ethe and J. Manor, *Against the Odds: Politicians, Institutions and the Stuggle against Poverty* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, London/New York, forthcoming 2011).

type of 'caste' institution – '*jati'*, an endogamous caste group – remains strong, but inter-relations between *jati's* have changed. *Jati's* and *jati*-clusters still matter in voting behaviour, but so do many other things.[7]

Landowning caste groups with numerical strength no longer dominate village life in many regions, as they used to do. Power relations at the local level are less ordered, more ambiguous and fluid. And as a consequence, those formerly dominant castes can no longer translate their dominance at the grassroots into dominance over state-level politics in India's federal system. Prosperous people at the local level may now be more aware of the interdependence of all groups within villages, but they may not like it much.

This process has also helped to make patronage distribution – on which political parties long depended in their efforts to win elections – less effective. As a result, some senior politicians (at both the national and the state levels) who want to enhance their election prospects have <u>supplemented</u> patron-client networks – which political scientists call 'clientelism' – with new programmes that are partly or entirely insulated from patrons who wish to divert funds for distribution to clients. These programmes address the needs of diverse social groups, but many of them have been aimed at groups which are poor and traditionally of low status. I call these '<u>post</u>-<u>clientelist</u>' initiatives. They represent a major new development in Indian politics.

But – to reiterate -- can we move from this set of changes to de Swaan's arguments, or something close to them? Has something like a 'social consciousness' begun to emerge in strength across India? I am not sure of the answer, but here is one possible route to consider.

During the period between Indian Independence in 1947 and the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, the Congress Party enjoyed a dominant position in national-level politics and in nearly all of the states within India's federal system. It was an avowedly social democratic party which took certain steps to address poverty and inequality – including an attempt ('*zamindari* abolition') to break up very large landholdings which existed in some but not all parts of the country. Nehru was personally committed to social democratic ideals, derived in large measure from Western European models. It can safely be said that he possessed a 'social consciousness'.

But at least two things limited the impact of these ideals. First, Nehru and some of his more progressive associates appear to have assumed that if the state established its hold over the commanding heights of the economy – which it succeeded in doing by the late 1950s – that would suffice to ensure that a social democratic order would gain ground and penetrate to the grassroots in this predominantly rural country. Congress governments stopped short of introducing an elaborate set of redistributive policies to address poverty and inequality.

[7] This is discussed further in J. Manor, "Prologue" in R. Kothari (ed.) *Caste in Indian Politics,* new edition (Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2010).

Second and more crucially, the Congress Party's then formidable organisation was dominated, in all India states, by people drawn from – and drawing solid political support from – the higher (or in some regions, the upper-middle) sections of caste hierarchies. These groups used their social status, their numerical strength (even though they did not constitute majorities of the rural population), and their control of much of the better land to dominate village life. And their immense influence within state-level units of the Congress Party enabled them to translate their dominance t the local level into dominance over the state governments which Congress controlled.

These dominant land-owning caste groups had little interest in social democratic or redistributive policies which would tackle poverty and inequality. Instead, they implemented policies and managed networks for patronage distribution which mainly served the interests of their caste fellows -- and provided other, disadvantaged groups mainly with tokenism.

Nehru was thus the leader of Congress, but also its prisoner. He was unable to ram many redistributive initiatives through his reluctant party organisation, and those that were actually introduced tended to go unimplemented at and below the state level. So in that era, the Congress Party was – for the most part – a social democratic party in name only.

After 1967, Indira Gandhi – Nehru's daughter and Prime Minister (1967-1977 and 1980-1984) – began speaking of more energetic attempts to pursue redistributive policies. After a split in the Congress Party, she stressed this theme in an effort to present her version of the Congress as progressive, and the other version as hopelessly conservative. She based her campaign in the parliamentary election of 1971 on the slogan "*garibi hatao*" (abolish poverty), and achieved an enthusiastic mass response and a sweeping election victory.

Thereafter, however, she did little to make this slogan a reality. Most of the leaders who headed state-level units of her party were not more progressive in their outlooks than the leaders who had remained in the other version of the Congress. Many of them had stuck with Mrs. Gandhi because they were factional rivals of regional leaders who chose to associate with the Congress opposed to her. A small number of leaders of state-level units of her party operated as progressives, but they were exceptions to the predominant pattern.

So – to make a long, complicated story short – the Congress, in and for some time after the Indira Gandhi years, stopped well short of being a genuinely social democratic party.

In 2004, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), a multi-party coalition led by the Congress Party, won enough seats to enable it to govern – with support from certain other parties (including those of the Left) which remained outside the UPA and central government ministries. In the Indian and international media, that election victory was portrayed as the result of a revolt by the rural poor against economic liberalization (which had begun in earnest in 1991) and globalization – and against an alliance of parties led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party which had governed in New Delhi over the preceding six years. It was widely reported and accepted that the rural poor had thrown their immense numerical strength behind the Congress and its allies in the hope that the UPA would pursue

more redistributive policies, to benefit those who had been left behind amid the economic boom that had occurred from the late 1990s onward.

This interpretation of the election result was demonstrably false. Congress and its allies had gained more support from urban and prosperous groups than from the rural poor. Congress leaders knew this,[8] but they chose not to challenge this myth because it had political utility. It made their ruling alliance in New Delhi look progressive and humane. And leaders of the alliance then resolved to make the myth of 2004 more of a reality at the next national election (which occurred in 2009). They undertook a number of initiatives that benefited poor, marginalised groups – alongside an array of other programmes and policy changes that benefited more prosperous groups.

It is worth stressing that some of those poverty reduction programmes – especially the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) -- sought to remedy what de Swaan calls the "docility" of the poor[9] by giving them the right to demand work, and by including provisions which would facilitate the proactive efforts of poor people to do so. It thus sought to enhance what I have called their political capacity – that is, their political awareness, political skills, their confidence as actors in public sphere, and their political connections (to other poor people and to allies among the non-poor). This was based on a broad definition of 'poverty' as not just a severe shortage of incomes and assets, but also a severe shortage of liberties, opportunities and capabilities (including political capacity).

They were able to spend heavily on programmes both for the poor and for more prosperous interests thanks to a spectacular surge in the revenues of central and state governments which began in 2003, and which continues to this day.[10] The Congress Party had long sought to cultivate support from a very broad range of interests – prosperous and disadvantaged – and this marked rise in revenues made that possible. Between 2004 and 2009, the UPA government spent well in excess of US$53 billion on poverty-reducing programmes. That is an enormous increase over such spending under every previous government in New Delhi.

The UPA was re-elected in May 2009. Certain new myths about the causes of that victory emerged, but one explanation had some substance. The poverty initiatives almost certainly helped the alliance to win a modest but important number of parliamentary seats – which were crucial in ensuring that it would be able to take power in New Delhi. We need to be more specific here. Voters who had merely 'heard about' the government's various poverty programmes gave no more support to Congress and its allies than to rival parties. But voters who had 'benefited from' those programmes gave somewhat greater support to Congress and its allies -- enough to make a difference in close contests, and numerous contests were close.

---

[8] This comment is based on interviews with several senior Congress strategists and their advisors in 2004 and 2005.

[9] De Swaan, *In Care if the State...*, p. 17.

[10] Between 2003 and 2008, revenues from indirect taxes increased 31 percent per annum. Overall revenues for the current year are expected to increase by roughly 25%.

Poverty initiatives did not decide the election outcome, but they helped to a non-trivial extent. For this reason, many politicians and political commentators have concluded that poverty reduction is 'good politics' – in that it benefits leaders, parties and governments that pursue it. And as a result of that, the pursuit of poverty reduction is likely to continue.[11]

We need to remind ourselves of what has not happened. At a mass level, voters who were not beneficiaries – that is, most voters, average voters -- were not enthused by the government's poverty programmes. They therefore do not appear to possess much of a "social consciousness". Those leaders and parties have, however, attracted more votes from beneficiaries of poverty programmes – a smaller group than non-beneficiaries. But that may indicate their gratitude rather than the spread of a "social consciousness".

At the elite level, it is plausible to claim that those senior politicians who introduced these poverty programmes -- and their progressive advisors (for example, on India's National Advisory Council) who played key roles in designing the programmes – possess a "social consciousness". But it may not be accurate to say the same about other politicians who have now concluded that poverty reduction is 'good politics' – merely because it has utility at election time.

It is worth noting here that the decisions to undertake programmes to tackle poverty were made at the apex of the political system. They were thus, to some degree, top-down initiatives. But there was some input from below as well. The political leaders who made the decisions were influenced and advised by leaders of civil society organisations and by progressive intellectuals and retired civil servants who sit on the National Advisory Council. Several of them had long been involved in work at the grassroots among ordinary (and poor, socially excluded) people. At the local level, they had sought – with some success – to encourage participation by poor people from below. They developed some of their ideas about what government programmes were required from their interactions with poor people, and from an understanding of the felt needs of the poor.

To this we should add a comment on those 'other' politicians, referred to just above. Consider the process that led to the introduction of the most massive and visible of the new poverty programmes – the NREGA which is the world's biggest poverty initiative in terms of the numbers of people who have benefited. A strong original draft of the bill emerged from the National Advisory Council headed by Sonia Gandhi, but its provisions were then watered down somewhat by people in central government ministries before it was presented to Parliament. And yet when the draft bill was then examined by a parliamentary committee, the Members of Parliament on the committee listened to arguments from progressives from the National Advisory Council and reversed the watering down – restoring the bill to something close to its original, more robust form. Most of those Members of Parliament did

[11] This is discussed in more detail in J. Manor, "Did the Central Government's Poverty Initiatives Help to Re-Elect it?" in L. Saez and G. Singh (eds.) *The UPA in Power* (Routledge, New Delhi and London, forthcoming 2011). I am grateful to Yogendra Yadav and Sanjay Kumar at *Lokniti* in the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi for help in accessing and interpreting polling data on these issues.

not come from the parties of the Left. Most fall into the category of 'other' politicians. They may merely have calculated that poverty reduction was 'good politics', but perhaps they were committed enough to poverty reduction to let us say that they possessed a "social consciousness". Perhaps it has somewhat wider currency than we have been supposing.

Even if it has achieved wider currency, we still need to ask whether the declining power of caste hierarchies has contributed to that trend. Here is an argument that might make that connection. The erosion of the old hierarchies has helped to make it impossible for landed castes which formerly dominated village life to exercise dominance at the state level in this federal system. The old patronage networks over which they mainly presided – and which disproportionately benefited their caste fellows – have also produced diminishing electoral returns, and declining caste hierarchies have contributed to that trend. So politicians have increasingly supplemented patronage distribution with 'post-clientelist' initiatives -- including programmes for poor, traditionally low status groups. The rules for obtaining electoral support have changed, partly as a result of the declining power of caste hierarchies.

The response of some politicians has been to conclude that some efforts to reduce poverty are 'good politics'. That on its own may not enable us to say that a "social consciousness" has gained currency within the political elite. But some politicians – such as, perhaps, those Members of Parliament who strengthened the NREGA at committee stage -- have gone further by developing a commitment to poverty reduction, and that implies a rise in "social consciousness". The declining power of caste hierarchies is only one of several factors that have led to these changes, but it is arguably an important element in the story.

Finally, we need to change our focus and come at this from a different angle. If we place the political process in the background and concentrate mainly on society and attitudes within it, another set of questions arises about de Swaan's concept of a "social consciousness" which may be of more immediate interest to us in Shimla.

We have seen in rural India an erosion of the view that different social groups are arrayed in caste hierarchies, based in part of notions of purity and pollution. It is worth asking whether this has made people more inclined to accept the existence (in de Swaan's words) of "increasingly intensive and extensive chains of interdependence" and "a willingness to contribute to remedies for the adversities and deficiencies that affect others".

Or has this erosion occurred so recently that people are still adjusting to it – so that most of them have not drawn conclusions about "chains of interdependence"? Are they more preoccupied with quickening competition between social groups, or with other things? Are those groups which formerly enjoyed deference and advantages in the upper reaches of caste hierarchies too resentful of the change to warm to the ideas of interdependence and mutuality? And are those groups which suffered within the hierarchies too preoccupied with old injustices to give interdependence much credence?

Critical comments on this line of argument will be very welcome when we meet in Shimla.