

Doing Meaningful Comparisons across States

Report on a workshop on Comparative State Politics in India

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This note is a brief report on an international workshop on 'Comparative State Politics in India' held at Pune during 17-20th December 2011. The workshop was jointly organized by the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Pune and the Lokniti programme of the CSDS, Delhi. The ICSSR was a major sponsor of the workshop along with the CAS (Centre for Advanced Studies in Indian Politics) at the Politics Department of the Pune University and the University of Pune.

Over the past couple of decades, the Lokniti programme at CSDS and the extended Lokniti network of political scientists¹ have been engaged in developing theoretically grounded and empirically sound contextual understandings of Indian democracy. The group has also developed extensive commentaries on electoral politics in Indian states (Shastri, Suri, Yadav: 2009, OUP; special issues of EPW in 2004 and 2009) and on emergence of states as the principal arena of political contestations in more recent times (Yadav-Palshikar:2003, Journal of Indian School of Political Economy and 2008 in Seminar, 591). At one level, these studies have underlined the need to view state politics as a tool to understand and explain national level or 'all-India' politics. At another level, they have opened up possibilities to move away from state particularisms as the central concerns of studying states and have highlighted the need to situate state level in a multi-layered context.

The Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Pune, has established a long tradition of Maharashtra studies over the years (Sirsikar, Vora, Vora and Palshikar, Palshikar and Deshpande, Palshikar and Birmal). These studies aimed

at understanding the nuances of contemporary Indian politics from a regional vantage point and also tried to contextualize the politics of the state through comparisons across states².

Taking a cue from these earlier attempts the workshop in Pune tried to institutionalize a conversation among researchers and students of Indian politics on the need and the ways of doing comparative state politics in India. It was planned as a part of a larger research initiative by the Lokniti with the institutional grant of the ICSSR supporting it. The programme plans to have three annual workshops that will take up for discussion both substantive and methodological issues of doing comparisons. Each year, the workshop will be woven around a thematic scheme and will involve participation of established and upcoming scholars from India and abroad.

The need to contextualize state level political developments in larger cross state and national contexts has been emphasized in several ways. Internationally, the sub-national comparative research method has been recognized as a powerful tool to understand and analyze emerging forms of democratic politics (Moncada and Snyder, 2012). This method recognized on the one hand, the spatial/ territorial unevenness of democratic processes and outcomes and thus prompted to go beyond national level analyses. On the other hand, it provided a methodological vantage point by way of controlling for institutional characteristics for intra-nation comparisons (Palshikar-Deshpande, 2009). At both these levels the comparisons across sub-national units has enriched the discipline of comparative politics.

In India, comparisons across states are obviously prompted by the politics of the past two decades where states emerged as the principal political arena. At this stage of unfolding of Indian democracy, comparisons across states help to situate each state in the context of its own state specific history and historical political character. But they

also help us appreciate these specificities by placing them in the context of what happened in the other states. Politics in each state is deeply influenced by developments outside the state- both at the regional and the national level. Comparing states may help us relate to these developments in a better way.

At another level, comparing the politics of Indian states will have a lot to contribute in terms of understanding Indian politics in a better manner. Firstly, it would help us better understand what actually needs to be explained in case of states and their specificities; we might as well get a sense of what is common to many states. Secondly, much needs to be explained adequately in the case of the 'national'. While earlier studies of the all-India ignored the state level, the more recent upsurge of interest in and awareness of the state go to the other extreme of essentialising the state at the cost of the all-India. We submit that the shaping of the all-India can be understood using cross-state comparisons and by identifying what is similar and where the dissimilarities lie.

Thirdly, and perhaps more ambitiously, we hope that the larger research programme on doing comparative state politics can push the discipline of political science in India to expand its analytical horizon beyond electoral and party competition to issues of political economy and to those about the interface between domination and people's resistance³.

By way of beginning of such long term conversations/ interventions, the first workshop in Pune engaged in comparing social configurations and their political role over issues of identity, representation and social justice. It did not follow the standard format of academic seminars. Instead, the idea was to initiate rigorous and yet somewhat more informal, continuing conversation. The workshop thus involved a blend of senior and younger scholars and of students of Indian politics and comparativists. We had requested a select group of scholars to present their ongoing work on issues related to

contemporary expressions of identity politics in India and these presentations became useful starting point for later discussions in the workshop. The exercise was not wedded to any particular technique of data collection or any specific mode of research and encouraged methodological pluralism and interdisciplinary research. We had also invited a few comparative politics scholars to discuss methodological issues in doing comparisons. A few young scholars/ doctoral students from Indian universities also attended the workshop.

Three sets of questions were taken up during the course of discussions in the workshop. The first was about the contemporary processes of construction of identities and their overlapping, fluid character. The second was about the diverse regional political settings and the ways in which they influence the patterns of identity politics. Intersecting both these kind of issues, the third set of questions was mainly about methods of study and framing of research questions for comparative understanding of these nuances.

Arrival of intricate claims of identities and group rights has complicated the arena of state politics in India over the past two decades. Three processes converge to shape the multilayered identities as they operate in the contemporary politics at regional and national levels. The first is the institutional logic of the post independent state and its concomitant cunning⁴. The second is the coming together of the skewed nature of capitalist development and the more routine processes of modernization. And the third is the contextualized nature of democratic experience in the post independence period in general and over the past couple of decades in particular. The intertwining of these processes has unleashed myriad region specific patterns of identity claims that the workshop tried to understand and analyze.

Identity politics across states has been broadly about two kinds of claims directed to the state- namely, those of social justice and representation. Ideas of social justice have evolved over a period of time to cover diverse (and yet interrelated) claims of state recognition to collective rights, regulatory interventions of the state in the social realm, equitable access to state controlled resources, social recognition of the collective pride of the communities etc. The most common theme around which demands of social justice have shaped was that of positive discrimination or about the reservation policy. The demands for reservations in educational and employment opportunities have slowly given way to more resolute claims of political representation of the communities especially in the post-Mandal era with the assumed logic that demands for representation/ presence will culminate in arrival of social justice.

In the initial phases of the post- independence history, diverse patterns of identity politics at the state level often blended well with the emerging regional consciousness and maintained a seemingly cohesive character of the state political arena. Over the past few decades however, the claims of identities and group rights have become more contentious and have complicated the functioning of politics at the regional and the national level. These complications were discussed in terms of 'multiple minority perceptions' in the case of Jammu and Kashmir by Rekha Chowdhary. The narrative described how the homogenized exterior of the identity politics of Kashmir is coloured by various internal tensions. Similar tensions are also obvious in the politics of the north eastern states where issues of ethnicity often get combined with the issues of language, religion and of regional backwardness to give way to local and regional politics. Discussions in the workshop centred around two issues in the politics of the north east- one was about the functioning of federal institutions especially in terms of special provisions for ensuring territorial and social balance of power in different areas. This was discussed in detail in Dhruva Pradip Sharma's presentation reporting the identity

issues in Assam. The second issue was about uneven appeal to and expressions of politics of violence. While reporting his ongoing work on issues related to ethnicity in the north east, Rajesh Dev raised this issue as a possible axis of comparison across states within the north east.

The issue of overlapping identities and also of regional structuring of the so called pan Indian identities was handled in two more presentations in the workshop. These presentations were based on current research by two scholars- Hilal Ahmed and Sanjeer Alam, at the CSDS, Delhi where they investigate different aspects of the Muslim question. Hilal put forward three overlapping formulations that he encountered as a researcher of Muslim identity in postcolonial India. The first was about the difference between identities as lived experiences and identities as objects of analysis and the productive tension that exists between the two. A related issue was regarding the processes of objectivization of identities that could have many forms and thus could result in a difference between the constitution of identities in the public/political discourses and the study of identities in academic discourses. Thirdly, Hilal mentioned how identity of a researcher becomes an important aspect of research, which should not be taken as 'given', especially, while doing political analysis.

The issues related to the researcher's identity came up once again during the discussion on studying caste. It was noted that a number of political science research students Indian universities are keen on studying the socio- political trajectories of their own caste/ community by way of research. This trend is a pointer to two things- the big arrival of caste as an explanatory category in the post-Mandal phase and also the tendency in Indian political science enquiries to reduce political processes to social categories. Over the years, political science research in India often used social categories for explaining political intricacies. However, bulk of the research in Indian political

science went on without investigating, questioning and complicating these social categories.

Caste being one such social category widely used in Indian political science, the need to complicate caste and the need to investigate contemporary existence of caste in a more careful manner was amply debated in the workshop. Ghanshyam Shah began the discussion with his revisit to Modasa, a small town in Gujarat that he first studied in the nineteen seventies. He spoke about the gradual change in the ritual hierarchies of caste but how these changes do not affect the existing power relations much. For him, the secular changes in the occupational structure have not led to creation of secular social networks in small towns of India and the social universe is still largely dominated by caste. The complex ways in which caste identities are shaped in contemporary Indian politics and the ways in which compulsions of democratic politics along with regional political economy influence these constructions were taken up for discussion by Rajeshwari Deshpande in her case study of the Marathas in Maharashtra. She tried to contextualize the recent politics of Marathas in Maharashtra by comparing it with the shaping of caste identities of Lingayats in Karnataka.

Issues related to researching contemporary caste identities were discussed in the group around these presentations. A larger issue was about possible classification of states in terms of the emerging caste politics interaction. KC Suri discussed how the issue was complicated because of the demands for backward status being made by the earlier dominant castes and also because of the skewed patterns of backward caste politics emerging across different states. In the context of changing map of caste politics interaction and also in the context of changing nature of materiality of caste a need to revisit the dominant caste thesis and its implicit categorization of castes was suggested.

A related theme of discussion was about selection of unit of analysis for investigations into caste politics interaction. If state politics is discussed in terms of party politics and also in terms of politics of mobilizations- at which level does caste operate? If caste identities are operationalized at the local/ sub-regional level, in what way does the state level politics provide a relevant context for shaping and understanding of these constructions? The need to use multiple research tools and mixed research methods to decipher caste operations was highlighted during the discussions. Ashutosh Varshney's presentation on the caste situation and the forms of entrepreneurial advances in the north and the south brought forth both substantive and methodological issues about investigating caste. With the help of available aggregate data as well as of historical case studies the presentation tried to compare the constructed regions of the north and the south to decipher nuances of caste.

Along with the discussions on caste, the issue of regional settings of the Hindutva identity and the process of vernacularization of Hindutva discourse were taken up in the presentation by Pralay Kanungo. He talked of the different ways in which the Hindu identity shapes in diverse regions like Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Arunachal Pradesh and how along with cultural and social factors, the nature of party competition and mobilizational spaces in the state politics influence these processes. Louise Tillin of the King's India Institute, London presented a case on federal futures in India and Nepal as the processes of restructuring of states and of ethnicities take place simultaneously. In its multi – level comparison across India and Nepal and across the four states (and regions within those) in India the presentation tried to uncover multiple ways that ethnic federalism operates and needs to negotiate with the recognition to ethnicities.

The presentation by Tillin along with those of Ashutosh Varshney and Yogendra Yadav raised several methodological issues regarding doing comparisons that were taken up

by the group for discussion. One of them was about the appropriate choice of unit of analysis comparisons. The twin logic in selecting state as an administrative/ political unit for comparisons involved benefit of controlling for institutional characteristics and the recognition that states have transcended their mere administrative status to become the main platform of politics. However, the exercises comparing of social configurations and resulting patterns of identity politics complicate the twin logic in various ways. Dwaipayan Bhattacharya underlined the mismatch between territorial/ cultural existence of communities and official state boundaries. Tillin talked of the state formation processes sealing and freezing the communal/ cultural identities. Sanjay Kumar emphasized how small units help comparisons. Yogendra Yadav went back to the issue of political salience of states in this connection. He suggested how the regional political environment along with its institutional set up plays an important role in the contemporary processes of identity formation and how it may be treated as the main background factor while inspecting the fluid nature of identities.

Political science research in India has hardly debated the methodological challenges before it. The workshop tried to address the challenge in its special sessions devoted to methods and careful framing of research questions. In this respect, both Yadav and Varshney highlighted the need to adopt methodological pluralism both as a practice and as a principle. As a practice it may involve use of mixed methods in a single study. However, conscious political science research needs to go even beyond towards de-centering method, towards understanding the limits of methods and also towards developing an ability to invent method in order to solve the substantive and contextualized puzzles that political processes throw up. Yadav submitted how studying modern politics in a post-colonial setting makes many demands on our intellectual frames and how comparative studies may help address some of them in a

more meaningful way. Varshney underlined the need to understand the trade offs of each method before going for it.

With regards to comparisons across states, Suhas Palshikar cautioned the group against taking up comparisons for the sake of it. He reiterated the need to carefully frame one's research question and to assess at each stage whether and how comparisons help in answering it. He underlined the need to develop a strong handle on state politics in order to look for comparability across different variables. Finally, he also appealed the group to take up for discussion practical/ logistic difficulties that Indian scholars face in conducting political research in general and conducting comparative research across states in particular. Participant research scholars of the Department of Politics, University of Pune, contributed to this discussion by narrating their own experiences of doing research beyond Maharashtra. These scholars raised two concerns. One was about language barriers in doing comparative research across states and the non-availability of training facilities and of adequate resources to overcome these barriers. Secondly, the students talked of asymmetries of power that prevail in the field of research and how as a consequence of these asymmetries students of Indian and that too of state level universities stand the least chance of getting access to resource material on current political processes since this often involves elite interviews. Given the paucity of formal training in most Indian universities about doing state of the art research in political science, these research students also welcomed the idea of long term conversations on doing comparisons that the Pune workshop and the workshop series tries to institutionalize.

Notes

1. In the process of undertaking National Election Studies and surveys, Lokniti has built a nation-wide network of scholars based in universities and other research institutions. All the major studies of Lokniti are conceptualised, operationalised and executed by this network and involve university students as field investigators. In this way Lokniti has contributed to the formation of a peer-group of established and young analysts of Indian politics. The network has presence in all the states of the country.
2. In December 2009, Suhas Palshikar and Rajeshwari Deshpande had organized an international seminar on 'Contextualizing Maharashtra: Comparisons across States' at the Department of Politics and Public Admn, University of Pune. The seminar tried to step out of the state bound frames of political analysis by encouraging multiple axis two state comparisons around important themes in Maharashtra and all India politics with Maharashtra as the constant reference point.
3. A related take on this in the Pune workshop consisted of discussions about redesigning and reforming the curriculum of comparative politics and of Indian politics in Indian universities. The Lokniti group, as a group of concerned political scientists located in different state level universities, hopes to develop this agenda of curriculum reform into a full-grown pedagogic intervention in future.
4. Rajeshwari Deshpande (2005) develops this argument in her work on Indian state where she discusses the accommodative and manipulative strategies of the post-independence Indian state in detail.

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