

Dipankar Gupta, *From 'People' to 'Citizen': Democracy's Must Take Road* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2017), x + 205 pp.

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This ambitious book, which appears amid much social tension in India, suggests a constitutionally recognised pathway to deal with the movement from 'people' to 'citizen', firmly establishing the essentials of democracy. Gupta explains democracy as a form of governmentality that needs continuous care and intervention by citizens. He suggests that the ethos of 'citizenship', the book's central idea, holds the key to curing

most maladies affecting society. This would empower ‘the people’ as citizens, but what role does this then grant to ‘the state’, particularly if the kind of state that democratic elections have put in charge of national development is not trusted?

The ten chapters address many issues that India currently experiences and are preceded by an introduction endorsing the ideas of Marshall (1977, 1990[1950]) about citizenship, conferring equality of status on all, while on that basis one then allows structures of inequality to develop. Chapter 1 seeks to clarify rumours regarding the immaturity and inconsistency of India’s constitutional reforms. Some people have propagated that India’s Constitution was created in a very short time, thus is prone to errors, and as it was borrowed from foreign countries, it cannot adequately deal with Indian situations. However, Dr Ambedkar’s discussions in the Constituent Assembly and his writings show that the issues debated are very much not alien to Indian society and culture. Addressing the question of insufficient time for Indian Constitution-making, Gupta argues that ‘[i]t took three years to craft the Indian Constitution after independence, while Americans did it in less than four months’ (p. 5). Further, he clarifies misquotations of Ambedkar’s speech on reconsideration of reservation after 10 years and linking of reservation to anti-poverty programmes. Distinguishing between welfare programmes and reservations, Gupta explains that these are two different things meant for different reasons. The former is designed to tackle poverty alleviation and the latter addresses the historical and social disabilities of certain sections of Indian society.

Chapter 2 discusses the tensions of nationalism and citizenship. Drawing from Western examples, Gupta warns about populism, the risk that majoritarian opinion can rapidly take a non-democratic turn and then threatens democracy if a country does not remain alert enough about the difference between ‘people’ and ‘citizens’. He explains that people become ‘citizens’ when a liberal constitution is put in place (p. 44), but not only in India, majoritarian populism may undermine this, exploiting various aspects of culture, language and ‘otherness’. Gupta argues that while India’s experiment of linguistic imposition during the unification of states after independence has failed, the country has to some extent succeeded in imagining a cultural majority that is claimed to be Hindu, by counting tribals, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs as well. To earn legitimacy and support for this notion of majority, a legacy has to be created with a myth to establish a dominant culture. Comparing the account of German romantics and Hindu revivalists in giving majoritarian cultural nationalism a historical colour, he observes that ‘from the nationalistic perspective, a good myth is always more serviceable than a good history’ (p. 29).

Discussing the role of target-based welfare policies and programmes in the building of citizenship, in Chapter 3 Gupta proposes basic universal welfare measures, but critiques target-based state welfare programmes as unproductive. Chapter 4 further identifies methodological flaws of identifying those who qualify as beneficiaries through quantifiable numbers (p. 61), given that a difference of just a few rupees keeps many people out of the below the poverty line (BPL) category. Gupta suggests instead a

universal approach to welfare schemes, which in his view will also be more sensitive to citizenship.

Noting that disadvantaged SC/ST populations remain largely marginalised on various social, cultural and economic grounds, Gupta explains the objective of reservations or affirmative action as 'measures of respectability so that, in the fullness of time, they would overcome their initial disadvantages and work as full citizens' (p. 46). He claims that political laziness and opportunism worked in tandem to turn reservations into something else than was intended and cautions against misinterpreting them as an anti-poverty exercise or a variant of redistribution. He also critiques the OBC reservations of 1991 as equalising the result rather than equalising opportunities, and hence argues that a good idea went wrong (p. 47).

Throughout, Gupta urges for a transition from 'voters' to full-fledged 'citizens'. Highly optimistic about citizenship, he argues that 'it is about quality of life; of being able to improve one's future', but also, 'it is possible to be a full-fledged voter and an underserved citizen' (p. 59). Clearly, the principle of 'one person, one vote' does not automatically achieve deeper forms of equality. Blaming political laziness again, Gupta claims that 'the most passionate political mobilizations today are mobilized, organized and led by non-political activists and organizations' (p. 100). Later, in Chapter 9, Gupta responds to unjustified popular criticism against social sciences in India as Western-centric disciplines, showing how democracy and social sciences are interrelated in an affinal relationship, as social sciences flourish under democratic forms of government. He seems, however, in Chapter 8, sceptical about NGO and civil society involvement, arguing that private agency involvement to assist underprivileged people will never be able to develop citizenship (p. 152). Though well-intentioned, they cannot replace the state and state-run agencies to convert beneficiaries into citizens (p. 152). While Gupta distrusts the state, he also seems to argue that it is needed. His calls for citizenship lead to greater emphasis on social equity as a hallmark of public life (p. 152). If we accept that democracy signifies a concern for 'others' and allows for the corrections of errors, then we are really heading towards proper 'citizenship' (p. 166).

In between, chapter 7 analyses the importance of urban planning in developing citizenship. Gupta differentiates the city in two ways. 'Space' refers to an area that arouses membership, metaphors and attachment, while in 'non-places' there may be a certain instrumental rationality at work, but this does not raise a sense of membership or commitment. Drawing examples from across the world of how urban planning affects social interaction and citizenship within cities, Gupta critiques specifically how Delhi's urban planners ignored the need for dedicated spaces for pedestrians, cycling and public aesthetics.

Chapter 10 resumes debates about modernity, focused on the quality of social relations rather than technological achievements. As modernity involves universalising trends, transparency and inter-subjectivity, it naturally promotes a kind of homogeneity at base. One might even call it iso-ontology (p. 178). Gupta argues that 'democracy without modernity would be just a majoritarian game, where nationalism became

very important for the people and all the old histories of blood, soil and territory and remembered historical humiliations' come to the fore (p. 177).

In the annexure, an interview titled 'The Telos of Modernity', given by Gupta to Nicola Missaglia in Rome, clarifies pertinent questions addressed in this book, especially how different modernity is in India from the West. Overall, this study is useful, but seems inconclusive regarding the road that must be taken by democracy to secure 'true citizenship'.

References

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