2011

Review of “The politics of autonomy” edited by Ranbir Samaddar

Chakraverti Mahajan

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/chakraverti_mahajan/10/
faced by those movements that seek to increase the representation of minorities in the electoral democracies as they exist today.

REFERENCE


Anveshi Research Centre
Hyderabad


DOI: 10.1177/006996671104500314

In its essence, autonomy is an instrument for the distribution of power in order to preserve the unity of a state while respecting the diversity of its population. Autonomy is generally read as a special measure of a state to keep its constituents happy. Since inception, post-colonial South Asian states are facing challenges in the form of ethnicity-based secessionist movements, troubled centre-state and inter-state relations and issues of location of minorities. In the last sixty years, questions of women’s rights, legal pluralism, rights of indigenous people, Dalit rights have also joined the bandwagon in resisting and challenging the overwhelming powers of the state. The edited volume under review clubs all these existing and also emerging issues and coins a collective term, ‘the politics of autonomies’. The book addresses two crucial questions vis-à-vis autonomy: a) its nature, development and working in the Indian polity since Independence, and b) its possible future in Indian politics. By challenging the existing notion that autonomy is an exceptional measure to keep undemocratic constituencies content, this book proposes that autonomy should be a basic element in shaping democratic institutions and practices. In doing so, the contributors problematise the idea of autonomy within the realm of the political and propose the co-existence of mutually interactive multiple autonomies and autonomies within autonomy as an

Contributions to Indian Sociology 45, 3 (2011): 447–475
impending future. The essays in the volume deal with diverse issues and are divided in two sections with a lucid introduction by Ranabir Samaddar.

For Samaddar, autonomy is the ‘other’ of governmentality—a symbol of emerging new spaces of politics. As the nature of governmental relations obscures the principle of self-determination, he proposes to study the retrieval and recreation of these autonomous spaces in the contemporary in light of this reality. Opposed to Weberian rationality and Foucault’s governmentality, autonomy for Samaddar is a way of symbolic negotiation from below with the differences produced by governmentality from above.

The first section deals with the genealogies of autonomy. Pradeep Kumar Bose in his paper ‘The Birth of the Autonomous Subject?’ reflects on the controversial conceptualisation of the word autonomy. Arguing that the concept of autonomy is theoretically weak and cannot have a coherent meaning, he prefers to relate it to the liberalism of Kant and Rawls. He suggests that autonomy had individualistic implications and cites Foucault who criticises modernity as an ideal of autonomy. As against the possibility of the autonomy of the subject, this paper ‘explores the conditions of agency of the subject’ (p. 36).

Paula Banerjee in her paper elaborates how women’s autonomy has always been dealt with in India within the parameters of community rights in the legal discourse. In his review paper on peace accords, Samir Kumar Das proposes to locate ‘autonomy as a space that is sought to be created within the realm of the state’s institutions and practices’ (p. 72). Focusing on various accords in the North-East, Jammu and Kashmir, and Punjab, Das observes that the notion of indivisible sovereignty has undergone a significant change. And thus, ‘the vicious cycle in which a minority becomes a majority by getting the borders redrawn and thereby creates its own minority and the circle continues’ (p. 89) needs fresh institutional alternatives.

Ashutosh Kumar’s essay illustrates the interface of the legal and political in autonomy’s contentious career. Kumar helps us in understanding the limits of the forms of autonomy protected in the Indian Constitution vis-à-vis North-Eastern states and Jammu and Kashmir which were framed under the shadow of Partition. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhary’s essay on autonomy’s international legal career focuses on identity
questions in self-determination, rights of minorities and indigenous people. He contemplates ‘that the dominant discourse on autonomy in an era of globalisation and in the latest phase of global capitalism risks assimilating and/or silencing different groups of people including women, thus reproducing the same oppressive politics as the liberal and patriarchal mainstream in which morality operates as a mask for power’ (p. 133).

The second section is on the practices of autonomies in Kashmir, Darjeeling Hills in West Bengal and the North-Eastern states. From the perspectives of critical geopolitics, Sanjay Chaturvedi recounts the story of Kashmir and critically examines various representations and discourses of autonomy about Jammu and Kashmir. He proposes a term, ‘autonomy of the autonomies’, to rethink ethnic identities and their location along with the idea of sovereignty. A close look at the working of autonomy granted to Darjeeling is offered by Subhas Ranjan Chakrabarty. Non-delivery of justice through autonomy forms the basis of Sanjay Barbora’s essay on the North-East, where he discusses the colonial Empire’s policies for a frontier and how the post-colonial state has translated and operationalised these in subsequent years. Subir Bhaumik and Jayanta Bhattacharya trace the evolution of institutional and administrative structures of autonomy in Tripura and Mizoram in a comparative manner. In the last chapter, Ratan Khasnabis writes about various dimensions of fiscal decentralisation at the level of local bodies.

The book provides interesting reading even five years after its publication. Issues like formation of new states, self-determination and autonomy movements, rights of indigenous people, women’s rights, and fiscal federalism continue to challenge the overwhelming reality of state even in the age of neo-liberalism. The caution that autonomies are not contention-free arrangements and there is no one form of autonomy but many does not leave much scope for critique, except for sloppy editing. I will give two examples; the citation of Faubion (1999) on page numbers 13 and 31 does not match the reference given in the bibliography. Another instance is the missing reference of B.K. Roy Burman who is cited on page number 89. The volume infers a great deal about the future of Indian democracy and will be useful for scholars of political theory, Indian federalism and ethno-nationalist movements.

Institute of Economic Growth

CHAKRAVERTI MAHAJAN

Delhi

Contributions to Indian Sociology 45, 3 (2011): 447–475