

Invitation to the workshop

Politics, Religion and Modernities in India

29 April 2019

Academic Conference Centre
Husova 4a, Prague 1

This international workshop will focus on the rise of caste and religious divisions and possible languages of secularity in contemporary India. It will explore the persistence of pre-modern identities and cleavages in contemporary Indian politics such as caste and community with special emphasis on Dalit assertion, and their consequences for the Lok Sabha general election which is taking place in April–May 2019.

9:00 registration

9:30–10:30

Opening address

Marek Hrubec

Coordinator of the Research Programme “Global Conflicts and Local Interactions”

Martin Fuchs

Max-Weber-Kolleg, Universität Erfurt

Ambedkar’s Theory of the Social: The Universal Condition of Recognition

Social Justice as understood by Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar can be taken as a shorthand for a whole bundle of values and norms which a decent society is meant to provide and which is required for each of its members to be able to lead a dignified life. While Ambedkar put strong emphasis on the chance for each individual to develop his or her capabilities, equality and justice for him had to be grounded on mutual respect, social recognition and compassion, or what he, with others, called fellow-feeling.

Ambedkar’s attempt to achieve this in the case of his own society through political struggle and by legal means – culminating in his work on the Indian Constitution – was accompanied by his endeavour to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of society and explore the role of social values therein. He both explored the place and possibilities of social ethics and thought of ways of establishing such ethics that would generate a just society. It was in this context that the question of religion achieved special prominence for Ambedkar.

The article reconstructs Ambedkar’s sociological and socio-philosophical explorations of the conditions for a just society. The focus is on what one could call Ambedkar’s theory of the social, which underlies his conceptualization of religion and of social and religious change. The article starts by looking at Ambedkar’s emphasis on social values and on the dispositional and attitudinal dimensions of social behaviour that affect the ways people relate to each other. This is followed by a discussion of Ambedkar’s views of the social significance of religion and his attempts to distinguish between religion that realizes the human core values, and religion that fails on the criterion of justice.

Towards the end, the article briefly touches on the issue of conversion. The overall argument refers to the ontological assumptions regarding human nature and the nature of human sociality underlying Ambedkar’s views.

10:30–10:45 coffee break

10:45–12:15

Antje Linkenbach

Max Weber Kolleg, Universität Erfurt

In the Grip of Development: The Dubious Recognition of ‘Environment’ in Indian Politics

Since the establishment of the BJP government in 2014, led by Narendra Modi, debates on the state of India’s environment gained new momentum. Critics worry about the continuous erosion of rules, laws and institutions meant to protect the environment, in the context of a state policy, which propagates corporate economic growth as its main mission. Especially attacks on the Land Acquisition Act 2013 and the Forest Rights Act 2006 (both laws protecting the rights of marginalised communities), speeding up ‘green clearances’ of industrial projects and, last but not least, pushing new large scale ‘development’ projects like the Indian River Linking Project (IRLP) or the construction of the Char Dham Highway Development in the Central Himalayas, alarmed vigilant citizens. However,

the foundation for the subordination of environmental protection to development was laid already earlier, most recently in the National Environmental Policy of 2006.

This contribution will critically review the environmental laws and policies in India since the 1970s, as well as their impact especially on those communities, who still depend on the natural environment for their survival (keyword: environmental justice). It will further show that – from the beginning – public and state recognition of environmental issues was a result of and reaction to citizen's engagement and social protest.

Johann P. Arnason

Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague

Revising Theories of Modernity from an Indian Angle? Reflections on Question Posed by and to Sudipta Kaviraj

The comparative analysis of multiple modernities involves not only empirical study of emerging formations, but also revisions of basic assumptions and understandings. Three levels of revision may be distinguished: practical, theoretical and reflexive. The first has to do with changes taking place when institutions and practices of Euro-Atlantic origin are adapted to other historical contexts; the second with conceptual reorientations necessitated by such developments; the third with the impact of both these trends on the self-understanding of Euro-Atlantic modernity, not least in the sense of undermining exaggerated notions of unity and coherence. Revisions of these kinds have so far related more strongly to East Asia than to the Indian subcontinent. The presentation will link up with some suggestions for an India-centred revision in the work of Sudipta Kaviraj, especially with regard to political dynamics (state formation and democratization) and the particular relationship between religious cultures and secularization that has developed in the Indian context.

12:15–13:30 lunch break

13:30–14:30

Jiří Krejčík

Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Is it the Economy, Stupid? Role of Economic Policies and Identity Politics in the Lok Sabha Elections

Indian electoral politics are quite often viewed as a system of patronage and clientelism, ridden by sheer populism of the leaders, or based on exploitation of existing caste and religious divisions. Although all these assumptions hold true to certain extent, the recent findings of Chibber and Verma (2018) suggest that the Indian voters are largely aware and motivated by the political ideologies in their decisions. On the other hand, Banerjee, Gethin and Piketty (2019) observe the rise of religious divisions and caste-based cleavages after the fragmentation of the Indian party system, while the economic cleavages have been disappearing over the last decades. This paper aims at reconciling these two seemingly contradictory positions, arguing that although the Indian politics have been somehow identity-based in most of the post-Independence period, it is the approach of the ruling and opposition parties towards economic policies which often decides the elections, namely in the fields where the identity politics intersect with the economic issues.

Martin Hříbek, Institute of South and Central Asia

Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague

West Bengal – a Bastion of Secularism in India?

The Indian state of West Bengal has had a special relation with the West. Kolkata, its metropolis and erstwhile capital of British India, saw generations of intellectuals who fused the best and the worst from both worlds into a great synthesis which not only forms the bedrock of modern Bengali identity but has also been successfully exported all over the globe. The nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance laid foundations for indigenous modernity out of Enlightenment ideas and domestic traditions. From Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore to postcolonial and subaltern studies, Bengali intellectuals keenly adapted outside ideas and schools of thoughts, developed them and flashed them back to the world. All this was possible because of long continuity of the elite cosmopolitan culture of Kolkata, which has been largely liberal and secular. During the independence era, West Bengal became the centre of leftist politics of all shades. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) held a firm grip of the state from 1977 to 2011. Indeed, secularism was one of the hallmarks of CPI(M)'s ideology. After a series of failed attempts to adopt Chinese style economic policies, the discontent with their long rule culminated in 2011 state elections when the CPI(M) was ousted by a populist Indian National Congress splinter party – the Trinamool Congress (TNC) which dominates West Bengal until now. The TNC too has adhered to secularism and the Hindu nationalist right found it hard to make inroads into this bastion. Hindutva's political front, the Indian People's Party (BJP), has never scored well at the ballot. Fervent grass-root as well as high level activity by the BJP in recent years and months in the run up to the 2019 general elections, however, signal that the tide may change. Such signal is amplified by the fact that nervous TNC increasingly turns to its own kind of soft Hindutva politics. Needless to say that West Bengal, and Kolkata in particular, are of immense symbolic value for the Hindutva forces. Yet public opinion there seems to suggest that Left is dead, that the next battle will be between the TNC and the BJP, and that the former, a domestic and still not a Hindutva party, is going to win. Is then this bastion of liberal secularism up and strong as ever? Or is it just a delusion, a nostalgic reminiscence of vanishing past?

14:30–14:45 coffee break

14:45–15:45

Pavel Hons

Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague

Dalit Votes: Will They Decide?

Dalits form 16% of the Indian population. Their votes are not negligible and could easily tip the scales. That is why both main political parties (Congress and BJP) try to woo them. It is somewhat paradoxical in the case of BJP, which is considered to be a high-caste party. Evidently, the Hindu right have changed their attitude towards the lowest castes, but to what extent? What does this change mean? And what is the reaction of Dalits? The paper tries to give answers to these questions. It maps the developments of Dalit politics in the era of independent India, especially its shift from annihilation of caste to caste identity building. It concludes that this shift is a result of the Dalit disunity and the impossibility to pursue Dalit politics effectively.

Tereza Menšíková

Faculty of Arts / Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno

The Voice of Neo-Buddhist Young Generation: Buddhism as a Part of Strategies of Resistance against Brahmanism and Indian Nationalism

Since the first mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 in Nagpur, the Dalit Buddhist movement has been growing and forming diverse activists group across the state of Maharashtra. My research focuses on a today's young generation of Dalit Neo-Buddhists, university students in Mumbai and surrounding areas, and on the communication strategies of their struggle against ascribed caste identity and social status to the major society. I analyze the role of Buddhism in Neo-Buddhist communication, their mobilisation strategies, and point to the importance of media such as music, documentaries, and theatre containing Buddhist themes through which they send a message of socio-political protest. I refer to the Navayana Buddhism as a product of cultural representation of socio-political activism grounded in the works of B. R. Ambedkar. Such activism challenges power relations in Indian society and forms resistance against the ideology of Brahmanism and Hindutva. I argue, that Neo-Buddhist strategies are creating a large amount of cultural material which amplifies the voice of Dalits in society and it is also a part of contra culture based on a critique of national tendencies and social behaviour.

Please register at jiri.krejcik@soc.cas.cz by 25 April 2019.

The workshop is organized by the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Centre of Global Studies at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, and Institut für die Wissenschaften in Vienna within the Research Programme "Global Conflicts and Local Interactions", Strategy AV21.