

Participation Against Democracy

About: Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, *Les avatars de la participation en Inde. Formes et ambiguïtés de la démocratie participative*, Éditions du Croquant

By Olivier Roueff

The historically informed study of participatory mechanisms in the Indian capital, New Delhi, shows that democracy resides less in procedural engineering, whether participatory or electoral, than in the mobilizations that take advantage of it

Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal opens her study of the uses of participation in India with a comparison of the different conceptions of participation held by critical intellectuals in France and India.¹ While in France participation is seen mainly as a possible solution to the crises and limits of representative democracy, in India it is considered essentially as an anti-democratic instrument in the hands of the upper classes to bypass the political representation of the poor and minorities, with the support of international institutions' neoliberal injunctions to "good governance." Indeed, in India, the deepening of democracy is almost unanimously associated with improvements in electoral representation. Neera Chandhoke, Niraja Gopal Jayal, and Partha Chatterjee² identify participation and, more broadly, the values and activities

1 I would like to thank Marion Carrel for her careful review of this review.

2 Neera Chandhoke, *The Conceits of Civil Society*, New Delhi / New York, Oxford University Press, 2003; Niraja Gopal Jayal, "The Governance Agenda: Making Democratic Development Dispensable," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32 (8), 1997, pp. 407–412; Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.

of “organized civil society” (associations and NGOs as opposed to “social movements,” parties, and unions) with privileged social groups. According to these authors, such groups construe participation as an alternative channel of access to the state, free of the representative mediations whose twofold flaw is that they are corrupt and that they make room for the quantitative majority, namely the poor. Indeed, it should be recalled that since the 1990s, the dominant have voted less than the dominated in almost all elections in India—with the notable exception of the 2014 election, which brought the neo-fascist BJP to power.³ This is notably due to the fact that, with economic liberalization and decentralization, the former have acquired new channels of access to public resources, whereas the latter are, on the contrary, entirely dependent on the electoral process.

Thus, the contrast between Indian and French problematizations developed in the first chapter allows the author to question the routine association of participation with democracy (in France) or with neoliberalism (in India) as well as to deconstruct the expressions “participatory democracy” and “representative democracy.” There is indeed no *a priori* indication of the democratization effects of representative mechanisms—as is well known—or of participatory ones—including mechanisms that are “bottom-up” or fully appropriated by participating citizens—at the time of their implementation. One must distinguish between the terms participation, representation, and democracy to be able to study both their articulations and their potential antinomies.

A Participation Mired in the Myth of the “Village”

These Indian critiques of participation are informed by the political history of independent India and by the attendant recurring issue of “decentralization,” which is regularly presented as necessary to improve the effectiveness of public action but is nevertheless bypassed in practice. From the three chapters devoted to this history, we can first retain the founding moment constituted by the debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar over the Constitution. Gandhi was favorable to the constitutionalization of panchayats (village councils) due to his conservative (but anti-colonial) idealization of the pre-colonial village community as a “human-sized,” economically autonomous,

³ In the sense defined by Ugo Palheta (*La possibilité du fascisme. France, la trajectoire du désastre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2018). The BJP promotes a nationalism based on the ethnicization of the Hindu people and on the repression of secessions resulting from political protest or minority affiliation.

and consensually self-regulating unit. On the contrary, Ambedkar saw village society as a space hierarchized by caste, the latter being synonymous with oppression and injustice. Panchayats were ultimately enshrined in the Constitution, but as a secondary referent. They were remobilized in the 1960s, and then again following the hiatus of the state of emergency (1975-77). Such participation, which was always conceived as “top-down,” was intended to circumvent elected officials in order to bring bureaucrats and citizens into direct contact. It was indeed believed that a stronger involvement of the targets of public action in the implementation of this action would make it more effective, especially since partisan competition was perceived as a factor of corruption and conflict harmful to the social harmony of villages and to the “neutral” or “technical” application of social assistance programs. Yet, while this last historical period contributed to the transformation of “participatory” decentralization into a consensual horizon, the government’s recommendations to the federated states once again remained largely unheeded. This is because, in addition to the limited availability of resources, elected officials took a negative view of mechanisms that were explicitly intended to bypass them.

The situation really changed only with the early 1990s reforms regarding economic liberalization and decentralization—the two pillars of structural adjustment demanded by the IMF. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, adopted in 1992, instituted a third electoral level: Elected local governments, with quotas for listed castes and tribes and for women, were created at the village and urban ward level and at the district level (sometimes with an intermediate *tehsil* level⁴). In parallel, a minimal but systematic form of participation was introduced with the establishment, at the village and urban ward level, of advisory councils that could be granted a deliberative role by the new local governments. Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal thus shows how participation ultimately imposed itself as a norm that was integrated into the sometimes-joint imperatives of decentralization and neoliberal “good governance.” While the implemented mechanisms were neither very sustainable nor very effective, they proliferated and their legitimacy was normalized, giving rise to a “cumulative process by which each new mechanism relied on those that preceded it, whether to distinguish itself or to draw inspiration from them” (p. 178).

⁴ This division can be likened to municipalities, cantons, and departments.

Three Types of Participatory Mechanisms

The investigation then draws out from this diversity three types of mechanisms, which combine different objectives and definitions of citizenship. The assembly (composed of the ward committees discussed in Chapter 5 and of the ward assemblies, or *mohalla sabhas*, examined in Chapter 8) brings citizens together with the elected and administrative authorities of a local district: The authorities present their action to the gathered citizens, solicit suggestions from them, and answer to them. The democratization effect of this mechanism is all the more fragile since it is based on a representation of citizens—as voters who come to “control” the action of their local governments—that is certainly novel, but is also vague and not very constraining.

For its part, the workshop organizes small groups of participants who are invited to reach a consensual solution to a local problem that is presented to them by the authorities. The objective here is less democratization than good governance: Citizens are conceived as useful residents because they know their neighborhood well and because their cooperation is necessary for public action. To be sure, the rich empirical study of the Bhagidari program (chapter 6), launched in New Delhi in 2004 to involve residents’ associations in the implementation of public action programs at the street or ward level, broadly confirms the usual criticisms: “We may wonder whether this is not in fact the political aspect of the “revolt of the elites” constituted by economic reforms” (p. 125).⁵ But it also allows for qualifying these criticisms on three points. First, the weight given to residents’ associations, which are composed of middle and upper classes, has had the secondary effect of remobilizing these social groups in the electoral process. Second, the multiplication and institutionalization of associations and participatory workshops has resulted in collective actions that have exceeded and sometimes reintegrated them into the social movement—as was the case, for instance, with the successful mobilizations around the distribution of electricity (2002), the regulation of cable operators (2003), property taxes (2004), or rights to water (2005). Third, while it has remained only an electoral promise and has been even less visible in the public debate, the 2008 extension of the Bhagidari program to “unauthorized housing estates”⁶ has favored the development of less elitist

⁵ This revolt is not merely symbolic. Thus, residents’ associations have played a leading role in legal proceedings that have led to the destruction of slums and the forced displacement of their inhabitants to the periphery.

⁶ In New Delhi, approximately one third of the population—mainly lower middle classes and stabilized working classes—live in unauthorized settlements. The latter are in violation of urban

residents' associations. The latter have been appropriated as complementary channels to the electoral process by participants who in this case are also often active in political parties or in movements for the defense of the rights of the poor and minorities.

The third form of participation brought to light by Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal is specific to India. The People's Tribunal—essentially embodied by the public hearing, or *jan sunwai*, but whose success has given rise to many variants—borrows from legal theatricality as it invites citizens to testify in public about the negligence of local administrations. The latter are placed in the position of the accused before a jury composed of experts who are chosen by the leaders of a citizen, activist, or even electoral mobilization (Chapter 7). Here, citizens are the beneficiaries of a failing welfare state: experience-sharing victims who neither initiated the mechanism nor found themselves solicited as potential providers of solutions—these being conflictually defined by experts vis-à-vis local authorities. Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal nevertheless insists on the democratic potential of this form of participation in a context marked by great distance between the bureaucracy and marginalized populations and by the very weak application of legislative texts. For instance, it is commonly observed that India's constitutional and legal corpus is one of the most democratic in the world, even as Indian society is one of the most unequal and oppressive. Indeed, public hearings create awareness among the governed about their rights and among the governing about their responsibilities—provided that usage is not routinized in a neutralizing dramatization of conflicts, but is integrated instead into mobilizations that give it meaning and strength.

Anchoring Participation to Unleash its Democratic Potential

In conclusion, Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal stresses the “great political ambiguity” of the Indian uses of participation, which reveal “a problematic relationship to democracy” (p. 179). Indeed, most supporters of participation—“bottom-up” included—are indifferent and sometimes even hostile to the ideals of inclusion and pluralism as well as to the electoral institution. The strongest mobilizations for participation are, in fact, essentially part of the fight against party

planning regulations, but do not occupy land illegally. They are less precarious than slums (where about a quarter of the population lives) but lack urban infrastructure.

corruption, with the result that the poor's main access to public resources is delegitimized year after year and that the role of civil servants is paradoxically praised against elected officials. This is, in particular, the lesson learned from the participatory experiences of the AAP, a new party that came to power in Delhi in 2013 and 2015 and that raised many hopes—incidentally, the chapter dedicated to the AAP is, to my knowledge, the first substantial study of this party.

The fact remains that participatory practices, “because they are multiple, innovative, and likely to be appropriated in various ways, allow for a deepening, a democratization of democracy. In India as elsewhere, participatory democracy reinforces democracy only insofar as it opens it, via new procedures, to audiences, ideas, and actions that are not (entirely) predetermined” (p. 183). In other words, the link between participation and democracy is no more obvious than that between electoral representation and democracy: The manner in which procedures are mobilized in social conflicts and appropriated by governing institutions, social movements, political organizations, and, most importantly, citizens, is what determines their effects.

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