



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religions, Democracy and Governance: Spaces for the Marginalized in Contemporary India

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The constitutional framework that structures the relationships between religion and politics in India reveals how the democratic and liberal concern for equal treatment and liberty for all has been pursued, along with a deep commitment to recognizing and protecting religious and cultural diversity. Although secular, the Indian conception of secularism is distinctive.

Experience of the working of Indian democracy over the last six decades reveals that competitive electoral politics compels parties to woo people from different 'communities'. Even when a religious community has an organized religious political party that claims to speak on its behalf, not all sections of the community align themselves with that party. Other axes of identity, such as caste, divide religious communities. The spaces opened by democratic politics and the dynamics it creates need, therefore, to be factored into any discussion of religion and politics.

Political mobilizations by marginalized groups within three religious communities (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) in Punjab and Maharashtra reveal important characteristics of the relationships between religion, politics and governance. Each mobilization involves a cluster of castes and occupational groups. They highlight the different ways in which religion and caste intersect and are implicated in the political process.

Religious identity remains the bedrock of social life and individual experience, yet democratic politics brings out new configurations and alignments in which neat boundaries of religious difference are occasionally blurred or overwritten by other identities, which surface time and time again as a basis for articulating demands for access to opportunities and development possibilities. Such articulations of their demands by marginalized groups demonstrate

- the existing fissures within communities
- that religion may be seen as a reason for their deprivation or as a source of wellbeing and emancipation
- that, while religious identity may be important to individuals, other identities also structure individual lives and social interactions
- the complex ways in which religion gains centrality or is sidestepped in the pursuit of better life conditions.

Lessons from these studies of the experience of marginalized groups in different religious communities in India include:

- The social differences within religious communities may play significant roles in shaping the relationships of particular religious groups with the state and democratic political processes
- There is potential for democratic political processes to influence discourses *within* religious communities by engaging with internally marginalized groups, addressing their development concerns and weaning them away from religious parties and leaders.
- When religion has a conspicuous place in the public sphere, electoral democracy sets complex processes into motion: in India, it brings into play other identities, allowing non-religious concerns to be put on the political agenda, but it also pushes even secular political parties into using a religious idiom and may thus reinforce religious identity politics
- Understanding of the relationships between religion and politics needs to be based on a consideration of the spaces opened up by democratic politics and the dynamics thereby created.

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