

Little Democracies

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India has been facing a crisis of conscience almost since the first day of Independence, with serious doubts about the viability of democracy for such a vast and varied population. The doomsayers have become ever more strident as the republic ages. They point to a parliament filled with placemen and hustlers, and political parties whose principal concerns seem to be dynastic. What chance does democracy have in this atmosphere? Is it time to give up hope?

Perhaps the picture will change if one changes focus, adopts a worm's eye view and looks at the little democracies all around. They don't have stately buildings of uniformed servants, nor even the ancient trees that people see in the movie panchayats. They don't debate lofty abstractions or issues of national importance, yet they succeed in areas where government fails. These little democracies are born from very real needs. They are the coming together of people when the state does not deliver.

Listen to Sampat Pal of the Gulabi Gang in Banda district of Uttar Pradesh's Bundelkhand region. "There are four kinds of courts—lower court, high court, supreme court, and then, if nothing works, the baas (lathi) court." Sampat's philosophy is simple. Make the government work for you, and if it doesn't pay heed pick up a lathi. "They are our servants. Public servants." Bundelkhand is one of the poorest and most poorly governed regions of India. Sampat and her supporters were forced to devise a system to exercise the right to rule themselves.

Banda district is known for corruption and violence, especially against women. Seeing women being abused and beaten made her blood boil, she said. So she decided to bring together a band of women, the *Gulabi Gang*. The idea has metamorphosed into something far bigger. The Gang, armed with lathis, takes up the cause of every oppressed, poor person, not just women. They take on corrupt, ineffective mechanisms and state officials to ensure a fair deal. Anyone can be part of the Gang, even men. This *ingenious* (or crude) pressure group is like a movement in miniature, and helps people get basic requirements such as the NREGA job card or BPL cards.

Now political parties want to piggyback on the Gang's popularity. They send emissaries to the Gang, to help them with their projects. They know that the women can swing votes. The women, for their part, play their cards to the advantage of the people they represent. This sort of structure is quite fluid and it's quite possible that one will find these 'little democracies' everywhere, in the remotest villages and in dingy city slums—in every disregarded corner.

It must be said, though, that mainstream political parties and governments are not always this receptive to the little democracies. Take the case of the People's Committee against Police Atrocities in the Jangalmahal region, West Bengal. This committee functions in three districts—Bankura, West Midnapore and Purulia—again among the poorest and most poorly governed in the country. It came into being, as other 'little

democracies' have, when there was a yawning gap between the state and its citizens. The PCPA began in November 2008 in Lalgarh, West Midnapore, as a protest movement against police excesses. But its leadership decided to address the problems of the tribals the state had neglected for decades. A senior party member of the ruling CPI(M) admitted that the party has completely neglected Jangalmahal.

But it didn't stop at that. The villagers were treated brutally after a landmine blast that targeted Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's convoy on November 4, 2008. Police raided surrounding villages, women were assaulted and men picked up at random in a search for the perpetrators. Finally, the *worm* turned as the people, mostly Dalits and tribals, on November 6, 2008, surrounded the local police station and held its occupants hostage. This protest was aimed at a public apology by the erring police officers, and monetary compensation. The state, familiar with monetary give aways, conceded that one but refused to give a public apology.

But the PCPA didn't stop at protests. It held its own 'pancha-yats' and built bunds, sank borewells, dug irrigation canals, laid roads, built small hospitals and spread its influence across three districts in a matter of one year. Meanwhile, the state sent in its forces to quell the dissenters who were on their way to setting up a little republic. It was an expression of people's power that the state easily could have co-opted with a bit of imagination. Instead, one leader was arrested (a central intelligence officer says he advised them against such a step) and allegedly bumped off another. The strong arm of the state has crushed this 'little republic' and the PCPA is now seen as a terrorist organisation.

Sometimes, little democracies operate well below any public relations radar. For instance, city slums have their own leaders who bargain with political parties for things like electricity, sanitation, ration cards and even the price of a vote. In Tamil Nadu, there are smaller groupings of oppressed people even in the slums—'panchayats' run by Adi Andhra communities, mostly scavengers, people who migrated from Andhra Pradesh in the 1940s. In their panchayats, they help community members resolve their problems internally, rather than rushing off to the nearest police station. It is a cohesive social structure, and it becomes a political force during the elections that helps them bargain for community-specific needs a larger group may dismiss as irrelevant. These are the little currents and counter-currents of citizens' movements that may in the long run make this country a real democracy.

Right now, though, the state seems unable to recognise these movements for what they are. It has thus no clear policy of dealing with little democracies. In the twilight zone that they inhabit, they could be crushed if they become an inconvenience. On the whole, such groups are allowed to exist until a political party can negotiate with it. When the party cannot or perceives the group as a threat, it usually moves to crush the group, as happened with the PCPA, accused of being a Maoist front, despite the committee's denial of any link. Sedition is as good a stick as any to beat an opponent because it is so hard to disprove.

So the real danger to their existence, ironically, comes from the state. Though they rarely cross the line and provide a valuable service besides functioning as a vent for public frustrations, little democracies are vulnerable to state action, especially if they are effective. Perhaps that is one reason why they, consciously or subconsciously, operate below the public radar.

That is a real pity. Everyone, including the state, should celebrate, not just tolerate, these expressions of the popular will. It is time one realised that India is not just the world's largest democracy but also the world's largest conglomeration of little democracies. □