

*Development in Karnataka: A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective*  
*Bangalore, June 10-12, 2005*

## **Communication, Democracy and Evasive Silences: A Preliminary Report on the Public Sphere in Karnataka**

*Dattathreya Subbanarasimha\**

### **Preface**

When I first saw the theme for the present conference it made me wonder if I would have anything meaningful to say at all in the context of this conference. The theme for this conference, you will recall, is *Development in Karnataka: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. The source of my wonder was the fact that, by training, research and work experience, I have, over the years, become deeply sceptical of the ideology of development<sup>1</sup>. I do not like the emphasis that the ideology of development places on certain patterns of institutionalised intervention in society – both by state and by non-state actors. I do not like the fact that the discourse of development is derived historically from the assumptions and propositions of the discipline of economics, a discipline of whose purported certainties – with all due apologies to the distinguished economists amongst us here today – I am not an enthusiast. More fundamentally, I do not like the ideology of development because it works with a facile and false teleology and is therefore – again in philosophical terms – undialectical: it posits a path of apparent ‘progress’ or movement from a semantically uncertain ‘undeveloped’ to a semantically equally uncertain ‘developed’ state.<sup>2</sup>

---

\* Ph.D. student, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>1</sup> One may also use the Foucauldian term *discourse* here of course, as in the phrase “the discourse of development”. However, I prefer the primarily Marxist notion of ‘ideology’ as it retains a more productive critical edge, and, more importantly, urges us to engage seriously with the question of emancipation. Nevertheless, as it should become clear over the course of this paper, I am myself no ‘Marxist’ by any stretch of the imagination. Indeed – but I won’t have occasion to go into this here – I hold that Karl Marx was profoundly racist.

<sup>2</sup> It is evidence of this lack of philosophical rigour that there is in the history of the idea of economic development also a concomitant history of semantic uncertainty. Hence the replacement, at a certain time, of the term ‘undeveloped’ with the term ‘developing’.

To give you a sense of the nature of institutionalised intervention that I am opposed to I will refer briefly to the recent appointment of Paul Wolfowitz as president of the World Bank. The World Bank, as everyone here is surely aware, was one of two Bretton Woods institutions that was put in place in order to promote the idea of development in the aftermath of the Second World War. Paul Wolfowitz is not by any means your average friendly neighbourhood economist interested in consumer price indices and per capita GDPs. He has been, as most of you must be aware, a very important member of the core team behind the current American president George W. Bush. He had previously held the position of Deputy Secretary of Defence and was assisting Donald Rumsfeld run the Pentagon. More importantly for us here, he was directly responsible for the policies of the George Bush government in the wars on Iraq, Afghanistan, and the so-called “war on terror”. In this capacity he was directly responsible for the bombing and killing of an estimated one hundred thousand civilians in the war on Iraq alone. If anything in contemporary times represents an arbitrary, undemocratic, and may I say, racist, exercise of power, it is this. And how is he rewarded for his deeds by the Bush administration? By being appointed president of the World Bank!

The enormity and audacity of the move is truly staggering! A man directly responsible for the butchery of at least one non-western people is now appointed to head a global institution that has, purportedly, sought over the past half century to concern itself with the balancing of the economic disparities<sup>3</sup> between the Western and non-Western worlds.

I narrate this recent incident not in order to turn this conference into a platform for polemics – incidentally, I am not in principle opposed to such an exercise in polemics – but only to highlight the vulnerability of institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Owing to the constitution and historical and cultural locations of these corporate entities, they have been, and will continue to be, vulnerable to racist machinations of the kind we have been witness to over the past few months.

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that I did not use the word ‘inequities’ here. My exclusion of the word ‘inequities’ is deliberate, as I do not believe that the World Bank – or, for that matter, any of the other big global economic regimes – has the intellectual wherewithal to make empirically meaningful distinctions between the two.

Returning now to the theme of our present conference, what bearing does all this have on the concept of development? If the World Bank – an institution unparalleled in importance as a development institution in the contemporary international economic system – itself can be so vulnerable to racist leadership, why should any non-western nation participate in its processes at all? Is anybody with any self-respect in the non-Western world willing to trust the likes of Paul Wolfowitz – one of the butchers of Baghdad?<sup>4</sup>

So the way the current institutional systems for the ‘development’ of the rest of the world are organised does not inspire much confidence amongst the great majority of the world’s people. In essence, the point that I wish to emphasize here is that the dominant categories of knowledge that the ideology of development is a part of have arisen out of historically and culturally specific circumstances and there is absolutely no warrant to hold the rest of the world in thrall to these specific historical and cultural circumstances<sup>5</sup>.

One of the elaborations in recent years of the argument I am trying to suggest here has been made by the anthropologist Arturo Escobar. In his book *Encountering Development* Escobar has argued very forcefully, *inter alia*, that without a recognition of the relatively recent history of the discourse of development and its institutional spaces, it is impossible to understand what impact current measures of economic/developmental intervention have on the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> Escobar is bold enough to completely jettison

---

<sup>4</sup> The visceral emotions and deep ambivalence that Paul Wolfowitz evokes among the American liberal middle classes is due to the fact that he is not a Jerry Falwell or a Patrick Buchanan that can easily be dismissed as the lunatic fringe of the American right. Wolfowitz is very much a typical member of the great American liberal upper and middle classes, someone who went to the University of Chicago for part of his education and had subsequently even been the dean of a school at Johns Hopkins University, both beloved institutions of the American liberal upper and middle classes.

<sup>5</sup> I am thinking here of the constitution of the Bretton Woods institutions in the aftermath of the Second World War by the then politically and culturally hegemonic North Atlantic powers.

<sup>6</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Escobar’s argument, to be sure, touches on various other ideas that have over the years been taken for granted. One of these is the division of the world into ‘three-worlds’, which, as Escobar so clearly demonstrates, was completely an invention of the new international institutional regimes in the mid-twentieth Century. For another very powerful critique of the ideology of development and all the other concepts and institutions associated with it, see Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge and Power*, (London: Zed Books, 1992). See also on an interesting recent attempt largely among policy practitioners to take culture seriously, Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., *Culture and Public Action*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

the notion of development – as economists commonly understand it today – altogether and ponder the contours of a post-development world and age.

If you've been wondering why I've dedicated relatively so much of my precious time and space to this preface, you need wonder no more. The paper I present today is a venture in the elaboration of an agenda for a post-development world and age.

## **Introduction**

What might be the major components of a critical social agenda for a post-development world and age? I believe that such an agenda must necessarily have at its core the object of democratisation. If there is one notion that has remained almost completely unscathed in the face of the constantly shifting sands of the intellectual uncertainties of our times, it is perhaps the idea of democratisation (or further democratisation). In societies across the world – in the face of the continuation of postcolonial domination of the non-Western world by Western and Westernized middle classes, and in the face of the disintegration of old certainties such as Soviet communism – cultures have continuously demanded that their voices be heard. Often these voices do not appear to follow conventional modes of articulating and recording dissent, and are therefore beyond the range of audibility of the dominant structures and classes. This has not, however, stopped the non-Western cultures from speaking out and going about their lives as they have done for centuries previously.

My objective in this paper is quite straightforward. I will look at one of the most important conditions that defines democracy as a system of self-governance. This condition is that all individuals in a society must have the right to communicate freely with any other individual or group of individuals in the society. This is the fundamental condition of all democratic processes in a society. It is thus that the idea and practice of communication is at the heart of a democratic society. Without communication, or with a truncated practice of communication, the practice of democracy can become deeply flawed. Thus the idea of communication may even be described as a *sine qua non* for the practice of democracy.

The public sphere of any society determines the space available to its democratic praxis. The public sphere is the space in which all citizens of a democratic society are assumed by democratic theory to be entitled to interact with one another as equals. They are also assumed to be entitled to contest and debate one another on any issue of concern to them. The public sphere is also assumed by democratic theory to be, more specifically, the space where the authorities of the state are monitored by an alert, rational and interested citizenry. The public sphere may thus be described as a realm of discourse and debate located between the domain of the civil society and the domain of the state. According to democratic theory, it is the sanctity of this realm that guarantees the integrity of the institutional framework of the rule of law and democratic governance.

Note here that I am describing the public sphere purely in terms of the assumptions of a democratic theory. There are of course obvious differences in the conceptualisation of a public sphere between a liberal theory of democracy on the one hand and a social democratic theory of democracy on the other. I will return to these differences at a later point in this paper. Here I wish merely to note that at the least the concept of a democratic theory provides the necessary ground on which to locate our analysis and examination of the public sphere in Karnataka.

As the title of this paper clearly indicates, this paper has no greater ambition than to be a 'preliminary' report on the public sphere in Karnataka. The reasons for this are the following: (a) The theoretical dimensions of a public sphere in Karnataka, or in India in general for that matter, have not, as yet, been elaborately worked out. It is therefore the task of my paper to sketch out, albeit in a very rudimentary form, the elements of what such a theory might look like. (b) The historical accounts of the public sphere in Karnataka have not, as yet, been written in full. To be sure, histories of the press in particular, both in India and in Karnataka, have certainly been available for quite sometime now. But this is not the same as a history of the public sphere as the conceptual and sociological categories of a public sphere are largely missing from such specific press histories.<sup>7</sup> Consequently it has been the task of my paper to list many of the

---

<sup>7</sup> For histories of the Indian press over the last two centuries see: Margarita Barns, *The Indian Press: A History of the Growth of Public Opinion in India*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1940), Merrill T. Boyce, *British Policy and the Evolution of the Vernacular Press in India, 1835-1838*, (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1988), P.S. Khare, *The Growth of Press and Public Opinion in India, 1857-1918*, (Allahabad:

important elements of the history of the public sphere in Karnataka and India. (c) My accounts of the specific empirical entities that constitute the public sphere in Karnataka are by no means exhaustive; they are schematic and seek only to be representative of the diverse forms of entities that prevail in the public sphere in Karnataka today. (d) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is preliminary in the sense that it is not a full-fledged and exhaustive report on the public sphere itself, but, rather, a report that is more concerned with describing the preliminary stages of the necessary interrelationship between, on the one hand, the elements of the public sphere, and, on the other, the social-critical imperative of the democratisation (or further democratisation) of social institutions.

There is one important caveat I need to make before I move on to the next section of this paper. I am not, as a scholar and a thinker, beholden to the idea that a set of Western ‘theoretical’ texts or models is readily available to be applied in the empirical ‘laboratory’ of India. This was, as most of us will recognise, the dominant pattern of governmental thinking in India for over a hundred years of the latter part of British rule in India.<sup>8</sup> I need not emphasise the fact that in post-independent India too most social science has generally tended to follow the belief that there is a set of Western theoretical texts that one may apply in the Indian empirical setting. My own work, on the contrary, assumes that in order to meaningfully engage with and reflect on our realities, our theory has to use the humanistic terms and language of our own cognitive systems. There is no point in strictly applying or transposing theoretical texts from elsewhere to Indian realities. Against such unthinking application of theory we may hold up here Mohandas Gandhi’s mode of active theorising. The one hundred volumes of Gandhi’s collected works have, for instance, innumerable precious jewels on how to theorise and actualise a public sphere in India. After all, what were Gandhi’s charakha and khadi if not the semiotic accoutrement of a distinctly Indian mode of communication?

---

Piyush Prakashan, 1964) and S. Natarajan, *A History of the Press in India*, (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1962). For a history of Kannada literary journalism in the early twentieth century, see

## **The Sociological Theoretical Salience of the Public Sphere**

As described in my previous section, the primary phenomenon that is assumed to take place in the realm of the public sphere is undistorted communication. All individuals are assumed to be able to communicate in this space both as equal public citizens and also as private individuals. So not only may they conduct business transactions, fight disputes with others, form associations, etc., they may also publicize their most intimate thoughts and feelings to any reading public of their choice. The assumption is that with such completely undistorted communication all issues and disputes among the citizens may be settled reasonably and publicly, within the legal and institutional framework of the state.

The classic liberal theories of the social contract, the legalistic institution of the state and individual rights necessarily distinguish between public and private. The public is related to the domain of the maintenance and accountability of political institutions, primarily the institutions of the state. The public sphere here thus monitors the legally constituted authorities of the state and ensures that individual citizens may continue to be able to demand compliance from such state authorities to the constitutionally agreed social contract between the parties. The private is related to the domain of civil society in general. The latter includes everything from the economy (for-profit corporate entities of all kinds), to professional associations, cultural institutions, the family, and all other social and cultural institutions that do not fall into the first category. In the classic liberal theoretical scheme of things, as economists know all too well, it was strictly only the institutions of the state that needed to be accountable to the citizenry. The individuals, associations and institutions of civil society were to be accountable only to the specific extent to which they had obligated themselves to other citizens by private contracts; beyond this limited degree of accountability they had, theoretically, a free reign in social life.

---

<sup>8</sup> One important statement of this aspect of the history of governance and social science in India may be found in Sudipta Kaviraj, "On State, Society and Discourse in India" in James Manor, ed., *Rethinking Third World Politics*, (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 72-99.

Social democratic theories about the public sphere are more sensitive to the historical careers of the structures of the public sphere. Thus, for instance, they do not think of the economy as being the pace-setting system for all other domains of social life. They are acutely conscious of the distortions – the invisible modes of domination that Karl Marx included under the term ‘ideology’ – that characterise the domain of the economy, distortions that negate claims of it being a domain of human freedom. In their democratic theories social democrats account for such distortions of the possibilities of human freedom, and reformulate their democratic theories in such a way that they may yet meaningfully pursue a democratic politics.

Moving away from this theoretical dimension now, the empirical reality of today’s public spheres is a very complex one, not always, or even usually, approaching anywhere near its oft-desired perfection. There are many factors that are responsible for this failure. Among these is the fact that reading publics are almost always split in multiple ways. There may be, for instance, linguistic barriers, or literacy barriers, that do not allow for all members of the public to communicate as equal citizens. There are also more fundamental structural barriers, for instance, the arrival of the new forms of mass media (television, radio, etc) and the functional and technological exigencies of this segment of the public sphere. Then there is the brute barrier of power exercised arbitrarily and without the victim being able to access succour and recompense. Domestic violence can silence women in the household, for instance, or child abuse can silence children for a long time over their lives. There are of course many more such barriers. These barriers tend to render truly undistorted communication in such a public sphere a seemingly difficult objective to achieve.

While these are some fundamental problems in any public sphere, there have been other factors at play that have had just as decisive an impact on the public sphere. The cultures of the old traditional communities are now gradually being transformed by newly acquired patterns of consumption. While this process has already been completed in the Western world, it has now also begun to attain dangerous proportions in much of the non-Western world. The culture industry in the Western world today has features that are no longer recognizable to the cultures of the old traditional communities. The extent of the commodification of cultural practices is a topic of considerable debate and controversy.



One of the more influential contributions in this area has been the work of the late German sociologist Theodor Adorno.<sup>9</sup> Adorno argued that the contemporary culture industry had rendered the products of such an industry as nothing but manipulative and reificatory products. Even the seemingly unreachable cultural domain of aesthetics had been affected beyond repair by the deliberate application of the laws of the economic system in the domain of culture. For Adorno high modernist artistic creativity represented the last mode of truly free and meaningful activity available to human beings in contemporary Western society.<sup>10</sup>

Allied to this commodification of cultural practices is the modern phenomenon of the consumption of the products of the mass media. Together these processes of commodification in the cultural sphere have resulted in the unthinking and uncritical acceptance of structures of domination by the populations of societies. Political elites at the helm of modern nation-states have learnt to thrive on such a commodification and the means that it provides them with to manipulate their own people. This is of course to ensure the peoples' legalistic consent to their continuance in power. The public sphere is the uncertain scaffolding on which all these different processes are working themselves out.

If we now turn to the history of the actual reality of the public sphere the first thing that strikes us is that this history has been enormously complex, wishful liberal theories notwithstanding. There are important differences between Western Europe and India here. I will venture a rather brief comparison between the two here just in order for us to better appreciate the larger contours of the world-historical processes at work here, especially those affecting the fate of diverse social classes and structures.

The most famous account of the history of the public sphere in Western Europe has been the one that the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas has had to offer<sup>11</sup>. This account covers the entire gamut, from the emergence, through the transformation and,

---

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by J.M. Bernstein, (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 61-131.

<sup>10</sup> Many read in Adorno's arguments a bias against mass culture read positively, i.e. 'mass' in the sense of the people-at-large. Thus many of Adorno's critics contended that his argument was nothing but an elite European's high cultural arrogance in the face of the practical mass culture of the new and fully industrialised America.

<sup>11</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).

finally, the disintegration, of the bourgeois public sphere in Western Europe. The bourgeois public sphere as a necessary realm of discourse and debate first emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries in Western Europe with the primary object of demanding accountability from the authorities of the state. Its emergence and institutionalisation during this period was integrally connected with the developments in the realm of the economy and technology, especially communication technologies. The bourgeois public sphere emerged out of a literary public sphere that had preceded it genealogically. It was the literary public sphere that had first allowed for private bourgeois citizens to articulate their private thoughts and feelings in the literary and cultural fora of the day. Subsequently, the demands from the bourgeoisie for the accountability of state authorities made use of the spaces of discourse and debate that had been made available through the literary public sphere. This then resulted in the classic bourgeois public sphere of Western Europe. But by the middle of the twentieth century, by which time the domains of social and cultural life had been overtaken by (a) what Habermas calls *refeudalization*<sup>12</sup> (b) and the production and consumption of the products of the capitalist mass media and the culture industry, the bourgeois public sphere had disintegrated and no longer served its original purposes. Specifically, it had now lost its ability to act as a check against the arbitrary exercise of state power.

When one looks at the history of the public sphere in India, the most relevant historical facts stand out glaringly. Obviously, it would be impossible to even conceptualise the contemporary Indian public sphere without looking at the historical facts of British colonialism in India. Although there were pan-Indian languages - Samskrita, Prakrit, etc., and Hindustani to a lesser degree – before the arrival of the British into India, none of these languages was equipped to be a language of global trade and commerce in a new commercial world. By a coming together of circumstances - some fortuitous, most scandalous – English gradually became under the British colonial state a lingua franca for the new upper and middle classes that participated in the British state and economic institutions. However, this was yet only a tiny percentage of the total Indian population. If one were to use Habermas' terms for the historical structures of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Habermas is referring here to the blurring in twentieth Century Western European societies of the difference between the state and society and the public and private, and the return of aspects of

public sphere in Western Europe in the context of the history of the Indian public sphere<sup>13</sup>, the British colonial state could be described as the domain in which *representative publicness* operated.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, as the new bilingual/anglophone Indian upper and middle classes gradually replaced the British rulers at the helm of the Indian state institutions by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was in *the constitutional state* that they sought to link their domain of activities and discourse to the idea of law. Thus *the constitutional state* in India has come to represent these specific classes. And it could very plausibly be argued that in relation to the rest of the population of the country it is *representative publicness* that continues to operate in the domain of the constitutional state.

Starting from around the middle of the nineteenth Century there emerged a very serious literary and cultural creative output in the various Indian “regional” languages. There emerged in most of these linguistic regions specific literary and cultural fora that could approximate *the literary public sphere* that Habermas describes. Acting in opposition to *the representative publicness* of the British Indian and, subsequently, bourgeois Indian, constitutional state, *the literary public sphere* heralded the emergence of the public spheres of the non-English speaking Indian middle and lower middle classes. These classes had had some form of formal education and conducted all their critical cultural discourses and debates in the numerous Indian “regional” languages. In Karnataka, for instance, they are represented by, amongst others, the *Navodaya*<sup>15</sup>

---

*representative publicness*, all of which hark back in part to feudal concepts and practices.

<sup>13</sup> Note that I am not trying to apply European theory in an Indian empirical setting here, but, rather, only trying to see how the history of the Indian public sphere might look in light of what Habermas has to say about the history of the public sphere in Western Europe. Habermas’ account – which is itself completely historical rather than prescriptive in any way – does not therefore become here a prescriptive account for the Indian empirical setting in any way. It is important to state these caveats, as, obviously, I have many fundamental problems with Habermas’ work, including his (i) understanding of world-history, (ii) positing of an allegedly hyper-sensitive and hyper-self-reflexive Western (Euro-American) community, (iii) vision of global democracy, etc. For instance, Habermas, perhaps because he is, after all, a parochial German, has nothing meaningful to say about the violent colonialisms that a great portion of the rest of the world experienced at the hands of European peoples for 500 years. Habermas’ is still the same old lie about European and Euro-American exceptionalism, again allegedly in the domains of science and capitalism.

<sup>14</sup> See for one version of this part of the story Bernard Cohn, “Representing Authority in Victorian India” in Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 632-682.

<sup>15</sup> *Navodaya* is usually translated from Kannada as ‘Renaissance’ or ‘Rebirth’. This literary cultural movement included such writers as Shivarama Karanth, Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre, B. M. Srikantiah, Pu. Thi. Narasimhachar and others.

(Renaissance) writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries. In recent years, what Robin Jeffrey has called India's "newspaper revolution" - the explosion of media entities and products in India's regional languages – has come to represent the gradual transformation of this *literary public sphere* into a full-fledged political public sphere<sup>16</sup>. So that today, accountability may be demanded of state authorities not only by traditional bilingual or anglophone elites, but also by the great numbers of middle and lower class citizens that are literate and participate in the new media fora in the regional languages.

My rudimentary schematic for a sociological and historical account of the public sphere in Karnataka has become necessary because very little has formally been written on the nature of the public sphere in contemporary Karnataka. Karnataka is today experiencing unprecedented transformations in the economy, society and the socio-cultural practices of its people, many of which have been highlighted in the introductory note to this conference. These transformations have resulted in the formation of extraordinary tensions within society along various faults, viz., social-structural, economic, and cultural. These tensions cannot but be reflected in the public sphere as a whole, for what is the public sphere if not a reflection of these phenomena in the society as a whole? It has therefore become necessary to study the empirical reality of the public sphere in Karnataka for two basic purposes: (a) as a diagnostic study of the nature of this public sphere, and (b) as facts that need to be looked at for any meaningful engagement with the state's democratic processes, and for the task of the further democratisation of society.

### **The Major Organs of the Public Sphere**

I will here describe briefly a few of the major organs of the contemporary public sphere in Karnataka. Before I do that I want to clarify, in case it is not clear to the reader already, that the public sphere is not merely a single place or institution or instrument. It is an entire domain of different kinds of socio-cultural activities that are oriented to a

---

<sup>16</sup> See Robin Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-Language Press, 1977-99*, (London: Hurst and Co., 2000).

publicness.<sup>17</sup> Thus the public sphere includes debates, discussions, writing and publication; the places where these activities are carried out, such as a restaurant/hotel, a coffee shop, etc.; and the institutions and instruments through which these activities are carried out, such as the newspaper, theatre, etc. The following listing of the major organs of the public sphere in Karnataka is not, and is not meant to be, exhaustive. It is indicative, as I have said before, of the diversity of organs that operate here.<sup>18</sup>

(I) Literary and cultural fora (in this category I include both the places as well as the literary and cultural activities that are organised in these places): the theatre; literary and cultural organisations patronised by private citizens - such as the *Saahithya/Saamskruthika balagagalu* – that one can find in virtually all towns and cities of Karnataka; literary, movie and cultural review sections of newspapers, etc.

(II) Traditional practices of story-telling: *harikathey, yakshagaana*, etc.

(III) *Kattegalu*: Places/shops in the neighbourhood or by the streets, where people meet and discuss different issues over a cup of coffee, etc.

(IV) Other public meeting places: The barber's, hotels, *bars*, etc.

(V) Festivities: Neighbourhood community celebrations for *Ganesha Chathurthi*, *Ramnavami*, etc.

(VI) "Secular" festivities: Activities on occasions such as *Kannada Rajyothsavas* organised by the neighbourhood *geleyara balagagalu* and other such associations.

(VII) Places of worship: Neighbourhood temple, mosque, church, *arali katte*, places for the delivery of *pravachanas* (homilies).

(VIII) Caste associations/religious associations: *Akhila Bharatha Veerashavia Mahasabha*, *Vokkaligara Sangha*, *Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Mahasabha*, Ramakrishna mission, etc. These become part of the public sphere only to the extent that they do not deliberately exclude the discussion of politics or any other topic from their fora altogether.

---

<sup>17</sup> Habermas uses the term 'critical-rational' to characterise the interest this publicness has in monitoring state power and evaluating all aspects of the socio-cultural world.

<sup>18</sup> I have one caveat here. The fact that there may be some overlap or repetition among the various items I list here should not be any cause for concern as the overlaps and repetitions are not of much consequence.

(IX) Political parties: These are the associations that, according to democratic theory, legitimately bridge the divide between the public sphere and the state.

(X) New urban public spaces: pubs, restaurants, music concerts (for the westernised upper and middle classes); music concerts (*orchestras*), laughter festivals, etc. (for the Kannada middle and lower classes).

(XI) The press/media/new media:

(a) Print Media

(i) Newspapers

(ii) Magazines

(iii) Journals

(iv) Book publishing industry

(b) Electronic Media

(i) Television/Cable

(j) Radio

(c) New Media

(i) Web portals for news, business, government, etc.

(j) Web portals for personal communication

A few comments about this list now need to be made. Firstly, while a few of these organs are receding from significance (e.g. *harikathey*, *yakshagaana*), others (e.g. web-based fora such as *thatskannada.com*, *kannadasaahithya.com*) are gaining in it. Secondly, not all of these organs are totally unbiased. Indeed, I would even say that a significant proportion of them have an explicit bias of some nature (e.g. the *Akhila Karnataka Brahmana Mahasabha* will not necessarily entertain Idigas in their fora, or the newspaper *Vijaya Karnataka* will not publish anything critical of the *Kannada Naadu* political party, etc.). That being said, on the whole, despite these biases, these organs do allow for the articulation and discussion of views on politics and other aspects of the socio-cultural world.

Thirdly, certain of these organs of the public sphere, especially the print and electronic media, have become organised on completely commercial lines, where the pursuit of profit drives all dimensions of the production of the product, be it a newspaper

or a television news program. So much so that if, for instance, a particular newspaper has already established a certain kind of readership, the newspaper will seldom be critical of that section of the population that forms its readership. Instead, it will direct all its criticism at the ubiquitous state and all the other sectors of the population. A good example of this is the *Deccan Herald* - whose readership comprises a number of the newly bilingual/anglicised upper and middle classes in the new economic sectors of Bangalore – continuously writing stories, investigations, doing surveys, etc. from the point of view only of the ‘new techies’. None of the other sectors of the state’s population, e.g. the urban slum dwellers, will find their point of view represented in such a newspaper. Such organs therefore represent not successes but failures of the public sphere.

Finally, those organs of the public sphere where technology plays an especially important role serve ambivalent functions within the public sphere. For instance, the internet-based fora seem on the one hand to democratise the processes of citizens articulating their views. On the other hand, this also leads to such a surfeit of information that it becomes very difficult for anyone to discriminate among the varieties of views that are being expressed.

### **The Main Populations and Constituencies of the Karnataka Public Sphere**

In this part of the paper I will briefly run through the various sectors of the population of Karnataka that constitute the Karnataka public sphere.

The latest Indian census, carried out in the year 2001, counts the population of the state of Karnataka at approximately 52.85 millions – 5 crores and 28 lakhs<sup>19</sup>. Taking this number as our base figure, we can start to derive the various specific constituents of this population.

One of the first categories of distinction amongst the population is that of the extent of urbanisation of the peoples’ habitats. The percentage of population that is described as urban is 30.9 %, which means that the great majority of the people in

---

<sup>19</sup> The Census of India, 2001.

Karnataka (69.1 %) are still based in their traditional rural habitats.<sup>20</sup> A corollary of this is the fact that the great majority of the people in Karnataka still depend directly or indirectly on agriculture for a living.

The second category of distinction amongst the population is that of language. As we know all too well, the reorganisation of the states of India in 1956 was done on the basis of language. This has meant that Karnataka as a federal constitutional unit has been marked out as the region where people primarily speaking the language of Kannada reside. The breakdown for the different important languages spoken in Karnataka today is as follows<sup>21</sup>: Kannada (66.22 %), Urdu (9.96 %), Telugu (7.39 %), Tamil (3.84 %), Marathi (3.65 %), Hindi (1.97%), Malayalam (1.69%) and Konkani (1.57 %). It must be mentioned that most of those that speak a language other than Kannada (say Urdu or Konkani) usually also speak Kannada in numerous everyday social settings that can't be addressed with just their mother tongues. However, there are two exceptions to this. Firstly, in the border districts of the region – for instance, in the northern parts of Belgaum district, the southern parts of Dakshina Kannada district, and the eastern parts of Bellary district – people may or may not speak both languages. Secondly, in the new urban centres of the city, primarily in Bangalore, there are pockets of people that only speak Hindi and English and not any of the other languages listed for the state.

A third category of distinction of the population is that of religion. The percentages of the main religious denominations that are listed for Karnataka are: Hindus (83.86 %), Muslims (12.23 %) and Christians (1.90 %).<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that most Muslims in Karnataka speak both Urdu and Kannada.

The next category of distinction amongst the population is that of caste. For reasons that are well understood the castes that constitute the Karnataka population are not counted by the census operations. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are an exception to this. Our numbers for the non-SC/ST population are therefore derived from other sources. The most significant of the caste numbers for Karnataka are as follows: Lingayatha (Veerashaiva) (15.34 %), Vokkaliga (10.80%), Kuruba (6.28 %), Brahmana (3.46 %), Maratha (2.90 %), Bestha (2.54 %), Beda (2.49 %) and Idiga (2.30

---

<sup>20</sup> The latest figures available on this subject are from the 1991 census.

<sup>21</sup> Id.



%).<sup>23</sup> There are numerous other castes as well, but my point does not require the listing of them all here. The percentages of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), who are counted in the census operations, are as follows: SCs (16.2 %) and STs (6.6 %). For reference we may note that the percentages of these for the Indian population as a whole are: SCs (16.2 %) and STs (8.2 %).<sup>24</sup>

Another very important parameter that the census operations consider is the rate of literacy in all the different states of India. Here, against the national literacy rate of 64.8 %, Karnataka's literacy rate is 66.6%<sup>25</sup>

As the summary set of numbers listed here demonstrate, Karnataka, like much of India, has a population that is split<sup>26</sup> along diverse lines. Firstly, the variety of cultural backgrounds of people (i.e. their language, their religion, etc.) warrants attention. Secondly, the extent of urbanisation is also an important statistic that says many important things about the socio-economic forces (including labour, production and consumption patterns) and cultural livelihoods that divide the people that live in the villages from those that live in the cities. Thirdly, the rate of literacy also draws important and consequence-filled lines between the two sectors of the population that fall on either side of the divide.

## **The Multiple Splits of the Public Sphere**

The public sphere that prevails in a region of the kind of population characteristics that I have described so far cannot but be split along the various axes that I have referred to here. I will discuss a few of the important splits here. These are not necessarily discussed in the order in which they have been listed previously.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Census of India, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> These percentages are taken from the Chinnappa Reddy Commission Report, cited in G. Thimmaiah, *Power Politics and Social Justice: Backward Castes in Karnataka*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1993), pp. 134-140.

<sup>24</sup> Supra, n.19.

<sup>25</sup> Id.

<sup>26</sup> I have borrowed the term 'split public' from Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 151-211.

Firstly, the literacy rate of 66.6 % for Karnataka implies that the 33.4 % of the population that is illiterate is substantially excluded from participation in the processes of the state. The inability to read or write imposes on them a significant handicap in their efforts to participate in the state's processes in a meaningful and consequential manner. This is all the clearer when one realises that the constitutional state in India requires a citizen to be able to read and write in order to participate in any of its institutional processes. However, this does not of course detract from the fact that illiteracy does not stop them from participating – as interested citizenry – in the reflective and critical debates conducted in the various specific organs of the public sphere.

The second split of the public sphere takes place along the axis of language. There are 241 Kannada dailies<sup>27</sup> that are published in the state and it is safe to assume that the Kannada language dailies do represent the great majority of the Kannada speaking people in the state. In addition to these Kannada dailies, there are also dailies that are published in Karnataka in at least five other languages, viz. Urdu, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi. These newspapers, although published in Karnataka, are produced for distinct sets of non-Kannada speakers. The result is a distinct splitting of the public in multiple ways. The newspapers of each language become the unique – usually exclusive – fora for the articulation of the views of each set of language-speakers – with virtually no communication at all across these linguistically split publics. This is nothing but a prescription for misunderstandings, polarizations and uniquely different - and occasionally dangerous –ways of representing the same factual stories. If anybody has followed much of the dubious coverage in the Kannada language newspapers of the Kannada-Tamil Cauvery riots in 1991, they will be left with little doubt that the Kannada language dailies cannot be expected to reflect the thoughts and experiences of the non-Kannada speaking peoples in the state. Possibly, this goes for the other language newspapers as well.<sup>28</sup>

The third split of the public sphere is along the axis of religion and caste. Although this might seem like a potentially explosive split of the public, in actual reality

---

<sup>27</sup> Anura Gunasekera and Duncan Holaday, eds., *Asian Communication Handbook 1998*, (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> See for an account of the consequences of the split public based on linguistic differences in northern India, Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, pp. 151-211.

this tends to be less so. Except for the occasions when Hindu – Muslim riots are being commercially engineered by people specialised in these vocations, these split publics have some sense of their own limits. Each of these split publics usually knows already where it stands in relation to the other religions and castes around it; so seldom do these splits by themselves lead to any difficulties or dangers. On the other hand, it is also true that many of the participants in publics split along these axes are actively interested in monitoring and influencing the domain of organised state politics. Thus a *Veerashaiva Mahasabha* or a *Vokkaligara Sangha* will not only reflect on and discuss the latest political developments in relation to their own communities, they will also negotiate and bargain with politicians of different political parties for specific promises in relation to their own communities. This has long been the tacitly accepted mode of doing politics in India.

The fourth split that may briefly be considered here relates to the extent of the urban-rural divide. When 69.1 % of the population is rural, depends overwhelmingly on agriculture for a living and is largely poor, and the rest of the population is urban, part of the industrial or service sectors and much better off, there are bound to be splits of consequence. The principal distinguishing factor between these two publics concerns their modes of consumption. Because the rural masses are so much poorer than the urban citizens they are left out of most of the products of the media and the culture industry. Being left out of the latter may not have much consequence, but being left out of the former certainly does. It means that except for the few television channels that are interested in tapping that market, the rural masses are completely left out of the anglophone or bilingual organs of the media controlled and moderated by the urban upper and middle classes.

Finally, in India in general and in Karnataka in particular, the split of the public sphere along the axis of class is of great consequence. As I have discussed elsewhere in this paper, the emergence of the lower-middle and lower classes into a public sphere that had previously been dominated by the anglophone and bilingual urban upper and middle classes has been a recent phenomenon. Indeed, it is still occurring as we speak.

---

The publics split this way are still in conflict with each other and there is a great deal at stake in this battle for both parties, including primarily the control of the Indian constitutional state. However, although the latter classes are conscious of their class location - partly because this is now under threat - the former classes do not really have a consciousness of themselves as belonging to a single class. The former are split also along the lines of language, religion and caste.

### **Conclusion: Democratization, Communication and Evasive Silences**

I began the substantial part of this paper with the stated objective of looking at the empirical reality of the public sphere in Karnataka for two basic purposes: (a) as a diagnostic study of the nature of this public sphere, and (b) as facts that need to be looked at for any meaningful engagement with the state's democratic processes, and for the task of the further democratisation of society.

Our study has revealed that the public sphere in contemporary Karnataka is an enormously rich and variegated domain of socio-cultural and political life. While some elements in this sphere are in a state of recession/disintegration, others are well established and efficiently functional, and yet others are still in a state of emergence. But together they offer significant opportunities for any citizen wishing to participate in the processes of the public sphere to do so.

The nature of the organisation of the different organs of this public sphere determines to a great extent their efficacy as truly functional units of an ideal public sphere. Thus a small-scale non-profit neighbourhood association such as the *geleyara balaga* might in fact be more effective as an institution of the public sphere than a full-fledged for-profit corporate media institution producing newspapers and television news programs. The continuing presence of multiple organs in the public sphere that sustain the practices of debate, discourse and discussion is a great asset. This is so especially when the spaces for the meaningful representation of the full spectrum of voices in society in the products of the corporate media are diminishing with every passing day.

The multiple axes along which the public sphere is split has had a profound impact on the nature and quality of democratic participation available to citizens. As we have seen in this paper, the multiple splits usually - though not always – have seriously detrimental consequences for the functioning of a public sphere. The splits introduce formidable obstacles in the path of efficient, meaningful and undistorted communication amongst all the citizens of the society. Often such obstacles have the effect of pulverising communication altogether, and breaking it down completely. The roles of the different media entities during the Kannada-Tamil Cauvery riots in 1991 demonstrated this with telling force.

If one is to take seriously the idea of politics as an essential human activity and engage seriously the issue of the structures of domination that operate in our contemporary society, one must be willing to work through the public spaces that are available for this active engagement in the organisation of our own political and social lives. Citizenship requires that we voice our thoughts and opinions, and the public sphere facilitates the communication of those thoughts and opinions to fellow citizens involved in this same exercise.

Despite the limits of the public sphere as it currently operates in Karnataka today - and there are many and important limits as we have seen in this paper – it is yet possible to promote certain elements and aspects of the public sphere as more conducive for fair and undistorted communication. By “undistorted communication” I mean communication that is not distorted either by the exercise of arbitrary and brute power or by the structures of capitalist organisation. We need to reflect on ways for promoting those elements and aspects of the public sphere that might reflect the population’s diversity more meaningfully. We also need to look at ways of making sure that the most vulnerable and at-risk individuals and groups are protected from any failures of the public sphere to do its job.

These then seem to me to be some of the components of an agenda for democratisation (or further democratisation) in a post-development world and age.

### Bibliography

-----, *Media and Democracy in Asia: An AMIC Compilation*, (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 2000).

Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by J.M. Bernstein, (London: Routledge, 2001).

Margarita Barns, *The Indian Press: A History of the Growth of Public Opinion in India*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1940).

Merrill T. Boyce, *British Policy and the Evolution of the Vernacular Press in India, 1835-1838*, (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1988).

Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn, eds., *The Audience Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

Joseph M. Chan and Bryce T. McIntyre, eds., *In Search of Boundaries: Communication, Nation-States and Cultural Identities*, (Westport, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing, 2002).

Ann N. Crigler, *The Psychology of Political Communication*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1996).

Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, eds., *The Political Economy of the Media*, two volumes, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Co., 1997).

Anura Gunasekera and Duncan Holaday, eds., *Asian Communication Handbook 1998*, (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 1998).

Paul L. Jalbert, ed., *Media Studies: Ethnomethodological Approaches*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1999).

Robin Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-Language Press, 1977-99*, (London: Hurst and Co., 2000).

Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).

Sudipta Kaviraj, "On State, Society and Discourse in India" in James Manor, ed., *Rethinking Third World Politics*, (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 72-99.

P.S. Khare, *The Growth of Press and Public Opinion in India, 1857-1918*, (Allahabad: Piyush Prakashan, 1964).

Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, translated by Kathleen Cross, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Sean MacBride Commission (UNESCO), *Many Voices, One World: Towards a New, More Just, and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004 [1980]).

Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal*, (London: Sage, 1996).

S. Natarajan, *A History of the Press in India*, (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1962).

Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., *Culture and Public Action*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge and Power*, (London: Zed Books, 1992).

B.M. Sankhdher, *Press, Politics and Public Opinion in India: Dynamics of Modernization and Social Transformation*, (New Delhi: Deep and Deep, 1984).

Jennifer Daryl Slack and Fred Fejes, eds., *The Ideology of the Information Age*, (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1987).

Charles S. Steinberg, *Mass Media and Communication*, (New York: Hastings House, 1972).

G. Thimmaiah, *Power Politics and Social Justice: Backward Castes in Karnataka*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1993), pp. 134-140.