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Editorial: Indigeneity in politics: recovering the lost ground

Harihar Bhattacharyya[1], Lajwanti Chatani[2] and Jivanta Schottli[3]*

[1]Department of Political Science, University of Burdwan, Burdwan, India, [2]Department of Political Science, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara, Gujarat, India, [3]School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Editorial on the Research Topic
Indigeneity in politics: recovering the lost ground

Indigeneity in politics is a contested intellectual terrain and a developing field of inquiry, being both multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary. As a critique of many of the Western-born ideas and institutions of governance, the search for indigeneity in politics takes one to the realms of political ideas, institutions, and practices of governance in the non-Western world. One major example of this is the idea of (national) self-determination, which has remained problematic. In post-colonial and non-Western countries, a certain intellectual and political construction of nationalism took place, which prompted movements that purposed it as the route to independence and decolonization. These movements attracted considerable popular imagination and were considered progressive, yet it was little understood that such a doctrine of nationhood was deeply political and self-defeating as it was derivative in nature (Chatterjee, 1986). It is no wonder, then, that this very central idea has provoked much controversy and, in adaptation to non-Western contexts, produced much political hybridity.

Any new approach must, therefore, grapple with hybrid political realities, which are different from their original Western sense. This is particularly so because most non-Western societies prior to their colonization by Western powers had had their own idea of political life and identity, which was more often than not displaced by their new political masters. In many cases, a curious admixture of the received ideas and institutional epistemology took place that appeared to be Western but was not so in reality. To give an example, in certain parts of India during the British colonial rule, the nationalist leaders thought federalism was a union between two religious communities (the Hindus and the Muslims). Broadly characterized, the search for indigeneity in politics is inevitably connected with decolonization, not only in relation to the governing institutions of the day but also to the very "knowledge" of the colonized people as defined by colonialism (Fanon, 1961). The alternative constructions of nationhood through indigenous epistemes were attempted but were evaded by the so-called "mainstream" and consequently marginalized.

The colonial invasion of indigenous epistemology took many forms. Tripura in this Research Topic of the journal makes a strong case for critiquing various colonialism-inspired tribal ethnographies while seeking to recover an indigenous ethnography for a better understanding of the tribes in Tripura (in India's northeast)—a hypothesis with potentially wider ramifications.

If colonization *per se* was a part of domination over a subjected people, this could proliferate in the discourse of power and domination in the post-colonial period by the brothers and sisters of independence. As is shown with empirical data in the article by Sharma, Kashmiri Muslim women in post-independence India were subjected to a

strange construction of womanhood by militants and insurgents, aided in part by cultural constructions in Bollywood films. This took away from these women the autonomy over their own subjectivity. This makes the task of deconstructing and decolonizing the phenomenology of post-colonial subjectivity more difficult.

A search for indigeneity in politics, therefore, inevitably includes the society and culture of the colonized. Even if such institutions are not the most appropriate or beneficial to common citizens, they are retained by the power that be, and these institutions have been found to be more beneficial instead to new avatars of power in post-colonial life. One is tempted to cite the example of the volumes of the Law Commission of India in favor of police reforms that have not taken place even after seven decades of independence. Another example is democracy, which mostly comes to mean the conduct of elections every 5 years to select rulers. The mandate to govern—and to govern well at that—has been displaced, as it were, by the license to mis-govern or ill-govern.

However, new political possibilities have also been observed, as the articles by Gupta and Bhattacharjee testify in this Research Topic. Based on a case study of transgender people, Gupta shows how the role of social activism or a social movement can emerge as an endogenous process that forces the state to become a stakeholder. Bhattacharjee's article points our attention to the puzzle about Indian federalism that has combined, as it were, two diametrically opposed elements: a strong central government and decentralization at the same time.

The search for indigeneity in politics must also consider how newer forms of re-colonization emerge through the institutional prescriptions for governance by Western experts for transitional constitutions, which are often at significant odds with the indigenous and culturally rooted notions of good governance. This has been pointed out by Soeren and Sabine (2022) in the case of the states in the Western Balkans.

Going beyond such issues, there is a need to look at indigeneity in politics at the macro-levels, where a colonial/post-colonial people attempted to understand themselves in terms not in accordance with the understanding received from the West but often going against the West (considering the latter as the "other"). The existing knowledge on the politics of indigeneity narrows down our understanding of real indigeneity by confining it to the most vulnerable sections of society. Seeing the indigenous peoples' approaches to issues of citizenship, ethnic identity, and rights, etc.,

as a reconfirmation of many precepts of Western liberal theory is integrationist at the cost of neglecting a large intellectual terrain of indigeneity in the colonial, post-colonial, post-transition, and post-Soviet contexts.

How indigenous is political thought or the ideas of democracy, nationality, and citizenship in the non-Western world? Why do any state-directed attempts to reconstruct citizenship produce so many tensions and conflicts in those countries? Any future project of indigeneity in politics must pay attention to the intellectual roots of such ideas and to the alternative notions of the people who can live with differences without a formal "secular" notion of citizenship. Such an approach has to develop a macro perspective on indigeneity in politics: to develop a critique of Eurocentric concepts and theories from the perspective of a larger indigeneity, that is to say, to bring out the indigenous attempts to define state, nationality, and citizenship, etc., on their own terms. Future areas of research should, therefore, consider political thought, democratic participation, citizenship, statehood, government, gender, political movements, and development as experienced and imagined by people in the non-Western world at large.

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