

Instruments of Intervention: Capitalist Development and the Remolding of the Indian State

2nd Interdisciplinary Conference on Contemporary India

Organizers:

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Concept Note

Most countries after World War II adopted some variation of state-led, Keynesian, social democratic, or outright “communist”-party driven economic coordination for development. For India it was no different. Five-year plans, planning commission, targeting of heavy industry through industrial policy, protectionism, and foreign exchange controls were some of the many instruments used by the Indian state to direct and shape India’s development trajectory. However, exhausted by the statist approach to development, by the 1990s India had again moved on with the rest of the world. This time it was through economic reforms, market liberalization, and a more purposeful reintegration with the world economy. Nearly a quarter century after the 1991 economic reforms, state intervention in economic management had definitively taken a back seat, or so it seemed with the election of Narendra Modi, who presented himself as a corporate-friendly manager ready to transform the bureaucratic lethargy of the state and usher in a boundless and energetic capitalist India.

How true is this broad trajectory of the Indian state and to what extent is the current administration reshaping the Indian state more narrowly? No doubt some of the old instruments of intervention, such as industrial licensing, have been dispensed with. Yet Modi’s “make in India” (MII) manufacturing strategy reads more like an industrial policy document where both domestic and foreign firms are encouraged to invest, transfer technology, and to source their products and services from India. The continuation (with some modifications) of the previous government’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), considered to be the world’s largest employment program, is another instrument through which the state wants to help those who do not have employment all year round. The modifications are double-edged: reduced allocations for central government programs but greater autonomy for local states to use the central government funds. Similarly, the Land Act of 2013, legislated by the previous government, while subject to revisions by the current administration, is another sign that the state has not given up on its farmers even as it facilitates land acquisitions for big business and infrastructure projects, including smart cities.

The broader goal of creating a modern and robust capitalist India is not new. Jawaharlal Nehru attempted it with the state at the helm of economic development, while Modi, more pragmatically and in a very different global setting, has pushed the idea of a more modern, confident, futuristic, capitalist India. In doing so, the state has not abdicated its societal obligations or economic intervention. However, for all practical purposes, the state remains two faced. On the one hand, for example, the state acquires land on behalf of capital, and on

the other, designs laws to rehabilitate and resettle those dispossessed and displaced due to land acquisition for non-agricultural purposes. The state also has a third face, namely, dodging that accompanies taking and giving. For example, by eschewing “privatization” or not reforming Indian “labor” laws, allegedly a principal barrier to investment, the Indian state today is neither neoliberal in a profoundly altered capitalist landscape nor dirigist as some of the contemporary industrial and employment programs seem to suggest. Rather, it is a state that constantly reinvents itself subject to the idiosyncrasies of Indian political economy and democracy and the broader capitalist dynamics of the world economy.

The Indian government’s various policies, strategies, and legal measures, when seen as instruments of intervention, raise a number of questions about the continuing role of the Indian state in development and transformation even at a juncture when it is ideologically unacceptable and instrumentally difficult, although it is financially practical. We pursue the following three threads, without foreclosing others. They are directed toward empirically-informed theoretical papers that document and shed light on the changing/unchanging character of the Indian state, its effectiveness in economic and social transformation today, and the evolution of instruments themselves in tackling India’s massive and myriad developmental challenges and opportunities, such as employment of youth or its role as the R&D back office of the world.

- The first thread deals with the changing nature of the relationship between state and capital and the mediating role of society in influencing developmental outcomes. However, given the internal heterogeneity of the Indian state, the variation in regional political forces, and the rise of Indian businesses in specific sectors, disaggregating this changing relationship demands deeper scrutiny. It also remains to be seen whether industrial, employment, and other interventionist policies work in the context of deregulation and international integration.
- The second thread calls for the assessments of major state-sponsored programs in terms of their internal logic, consistency across a set of related programs, and external referents vis-à-vis actual outcomes, acknowledging that the MII is very recent and the land act remains a work-in-progress. Relatedly, how regional variation in program outcomes relates to the working of the local state, making the interaction between government, business, and local communities another line of inquiry.
- The third thread poses the question of democracy and its relationship to the Indian variety of capitalism as seen through the lens of the various state-sponsored interventions that take, give, and avoid. At first blush, most instruments have a democratic sentiment attached to them, such as employment through manufacturing and rural development and protection of farmers from arbitrary dispossession and displacement. Yet the very same MII appropriates land and the land act dispossesses workers, peasants, and other marginalized communities. The de facto privatization through informalization and cutbacks also generate insecure employment. How to theoretically negotiate this ambiguous role of the Indian state calls for revisiting the on-going role of the Indian state in economic governance.

We welcome proposals that build on any one of these broad threads. We expect to have a balance of papers between the three threads, between the instruments chosen for analysis, and a balance between empirically informed theoretical and theoretically informed empirical papers.

Date of Conference: December 10-12, 2015 (two and a half days)

Location: Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, India

We have funds to support a limited number of India-based scholars with domestic economy fares to Kolkata. International participants are encouraged to secure travel support on their own as we can provide only partial travel support for a few international participants. Local hospitality (lodging and meals) for the duration of the conference for both domestic and international participants will be provided. No other expenses will be covered, including but not limited to local transportation and visa.

Those interested in participating must adhere to the following deadlines:

1. The deadline for the proposal is **Monday, July 20, 2015**.
2. Authors are informed of the decision on their proposals by **Monday, August 3, 2015**.
3. Invited/selected authors must submit complete papers by **Monday, November 30, 2015**.
4. The conference organizers hold the first right of rejection of papers by authors accepting the invitation to participate.

The proposal must clearly identify the research question, its relevance to theorizing the Indian state, methodology to be adopted, and expected findings.

Additional details on travel, accommodation, etc. will be provided in due course.

For any substantive questions contact either:

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