Revisiting the Crisis of Representation Thesis: The Indian Context

Neera Chandhoke

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Summary
This essay addresses the ‘crisis of representation’ thesis by examining some of the findings of a survey conducted in Delhi in the year 2003. On the basis of the data that was collected during the course of the survey, I seek to revisit two rather significant questions that have been thrown up by the thesis. Firstly how valid is the assumption that people have lost confidence in the capacity of political parties to represent them in forums of policy making? Secondly, have people really come to believe that civil society groups, such as non-governmental organisations, can better help them resolve the oft intractable problems of everyday life? The answers to these questions may prove to be of some political interest, since they might help to throw light on two vital political and theoretical issues: the relationship between citizens and the world of representative politics in particular, and the adequacy of representative democracy in general. The findings of the research project tell us that the crisis of representation runs deep, and that people seem to have lost confidence in the ability or indeed the political will of all organisations, whether they belong to the political or the civil domain, to address their basic problems.

Introduction:
The ‘crisis of representation’ thesis, which has preoccupied a fair amount of academic energy for some time now, holds that citizens across the world have shifted from older and traditional forms of representation such as political parties and trade unions, to ‘newer’, modes such as social movements, informal citizen groups, and non-governmental organisations. Alternatively taking the Eastern and Central European experience of the 1980s as a referral, theorists suggest that citizens faced with recalcitrant and unresponsive political institutions turn their back on the political domain and form self-help organisations in civil society to resolve their problems. In other words, now people either approach the state and its institutions of policy making through civil society organisations, or come together in and through dense networks of associational life, in order to negotiate their collective problems. The shift, it is generally suggested, has taken place for the following reasons: traditional modes of representation such as political parties have exhausted their capacity to represent the aspirations of their constituencies, they have become hierarchical, bureaucratic, and rigid, and they tend to follow the political logic and impulse of power seeking more, and pursue the task of representing the needs and the interests of their constituents less. Since political modes of representation have proved inadequate, the move to civil society organisations, which at least are in touch with the exigencies of everyday life, is both natural and understandable. The days of grand representational politics may be over, and it is time to concentrate on the local, the immediate, and the experiential through the study of multiple, decentred, localised, and single-issue modes of representation.

In this essay I re-examine the two basic questions that have been thrown up by the ‘crisis of representation’ thesis. Firstly, is the assumption that people have lost confidence in traditional forms of representation such as political parties valid? Secondly, have people turned towards relatively newer forms of interest aggregation and representation to help them solve their problems? The answers to these questions may prove to be of some political significance, for they will necessarily serve to highlight the relationship between citizens and the world of representative politics in particular and the adequacy of representative democracy in general. The crisis of representation thesis is re-examined by reflecting on the findings of an empirical survey conducted in Delhi in the year 2003. The research team in the course of its fieldwork interviewed 1401 inhabitants of the city and asked them to respond to a structured questionnaire.
objective of administering the questionnaire was to allow the team to map out patterns of politics in civil society: by asking people to identify the magnitude of the various problems they encounter in their existential capacity, to examine whether traditional and familiar practices of representation that were characteristic of mass politics for most of the twentieth century have slackened, to inquire what is it that people do if older forms have slackened, to probe popular perceptions of other modes of representation such as religious and caste associations and nongovernmental organisations, to figure out whether patterns of politics in the world of work and that in residential neighbourhoods diverge, and to evaluate the implications of all this on political awareness as well as on the possibilities for collective action.

On the basis of some of the empirical data generated by the survey, I seek to foreground the opinions, the interests, and the political activities of those who are represented, rather than concentrate on those who do the representing. I focus in particular on responses to two questions: what do people think of traditional as well as of relatively newer modes of representation? Or what standing do political and civil society organisations hold in popular expectations? Secondly, what is it that people do when it comes to problems that demand resolution, if indeed all modes of representation are found wanting? The answers to these questions may help us to understand the nature of representative democracy in India.

A Note on Method
The research team, taking the categories provided by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi as the base for investigation, distributed the survey across different and distinct categories of residential areas. The MCD categorises residential settlements on the basis of (a) infrastructure: sewerage, public and internal roads, and public spaces such as community halls, and parks, and (b) services: primary schools, dispensaries, electricity, and water supply, which are provided to the area. On these two grounds the MCD categorises residential areas as (a) planned colonies, (b) unauthorised regularised colonies, (c) unauthorised unregularised colonies, and (d) jhuggi jhopris and slums. 600 of the 1401 questionnaires were administered to the relatively poorer sections of society living in b, c, and d categories of residential settlements. 801 questionnaires were distributed on the basis of the ratio between the four types of colonies, within each of the 70 legislative constituencies in Delhi.

Democracy and Representation
‘Sovereignty, wrote the great defender of direct democracy, Jean Jacques Rousseau, ‘for the same reason as makes it inalienable, cannot be represented; it lies essentially in the general will, and will does not admit of representation: it is either the same or the other; there is no intermediate possibility’. Other theorists concur: Levine for instance argues that democracy gives the right to the citizens to critically choose among alternative options. However since representative democracy does not allow the citizen to participate directly in the processes of decision making, all that he or s/he can do is to confer consent upon the choices of others. This, concludes Levine, violates the basic precepts of democracy. In general the criticism of representative democracy focuses on the fact that popular sovereignty diminishes considerably; when citizens delegate the power of representing their opinions, their needs, and their interests to someone else.

However, despite the often dire warnings of critics that representative democracy compromises the normative premises of democracy, it is representative democracy that has come to command the world ever since the institutionalisation of democracy itself. Of course there are very good reasons for this, the primary reason being the sheer size and complexity of modern societies, which renders direct or face-to-face democracy a remote possibility. Therefore, though it is true that representative democracy diminishes the autonomy of citizens, it is also true that people need to be represented, simply because direct democracy would demand the kind of time and energy that no one can afford in today’s rushed world. Representatives in other words take over the task
of bringing popular opinion to bear upon policy making. They also act as channels of accountability. Therefore, for better or for worse, representative democracy has become synonymous with democracy itself.

Basically representative democracy requires a third set of political agents to mediate between the first two sets: the citizen and the state. At this stage of the argument four points, which might help to clarify the concept of representation, are perhaps in order. Firstly, whereas the status of the citizen as the primary unit of political society is incontrovertible, the status of the representative is derivative. The representative is authorised to speak on behalf of a constituency because the members of a given constituency consent to the delegation of their right to participate in forums that make policy through elections. Secondly, it is important to note that the representative does not represent persons as such; s/he is charged with the duty of seeing that the interests of the constituents are adequately, competently and effectively represented in forums of decision-making. To phrase this point differently: the representative proxies for those who are being represented. Thirdly, the representative does not only represent interests, s/he is obliged to further these interests and to ensure that something is done about the pressing problems of her constituency, in the production of appropriate policies for instance. And fourthly, the representative is accountable to her constituency for all acts of omission and commission. Therefore, citizens have, at least in theory, command over who they want to be represented by. They are also in a position to choose what particular issue or sets of issues they consider worthy of representation.

We can more or less assume that the political landscape of any given society will be necessarily dotted by the presence of a number of organisations: political parties, the media, social associations, neighbourhood groups, all kinds of professional lobbies, non-governmental and non-profit organisations, philanthropic bodies, social and political movements, and trade unions. All of them assert that they bring the perspectives of their constituents to bear upon the process of policy-making. All of them claim to represent the interests of their members. Besides all this does not exhaust the stock of political representation, because citizens have the right to resort to direct collective action—demonstrations, marches, petitions, or strikes—in order to present their demands to the state. However, political parties possess three advantages over other modes of representation. One, they represent all the members of a territorially delimited constituency as opposed to say trade unions, which by definition only represent their members or a particular class of professionals. Secondly, political representatives are accountable to their constituents via the route of elections in contrast to for example non-governmental organisations, which are after all not directly responsible to the constituency they cater to. Thirdly the political representative acquires legitimacy by the fact that s/he has been elected by the people whose interests s/he is charged with representing. For these reasons the widespread institutionalisation of the competitive party system by the middle of the twentieth century appeared to have negotiated the dilemma of democracy: the impossibility of establishing a relationship between the citizen and the state in large and complex societies, to some satisfaction.

Substantive Democracy and Representation

In India, in the immediate aftermath of independence, faith in the institution of the political party to represent popular aspirations, interests, and needs, was both established and validated by the fact that the freedom movement had been led by one such party: the Indian National Congress. Not only had the Congress, whose origins go back to 1885, mobilised vast masses of people in and through the freedom struggle—the scale of mobilisation in India suggest historians rivalled that of China during the first half of the twentieth century—it enabled the transformation of the ordinary Indian from ‘subject’ to ‘citizen’ with all the rights that the status of citizenship carries with it. The institutionalisation of the party system was paralleled by the institutionalisation of formal democracy. India’s record of political democracy in the fifty-four years since the adoption.
of the constitution remains unrivalled, at least in the developing world. Apart from the period
between June 1975 and January 1977 when democracy was suspended via the imposition of
internal emergency by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, elections have been held on time,
competitive party politics offer choices to the voters and ensure a peaceable transfer of power,
and universal adult franchise allows a majority of adults to exercise popular sovereignty.

Yet scepticism about India’s claim to democratic credentials has come to haunt scholars as well
as stalk hope in the project of democracy for some time now. For India’s somewhat impressive
record in establishing formal democracy has sadly enough not led to the establishment of a fuller
version of democracy or substantive democracy. Substantive democracy, recollect, is not only
about electing candidates to power and thereby vesting them with legitimacy; it is about ensuring
that every human being is treated with the respect that is due to her or him simply because s/he is
human. Treating individuals with respect means that the ordinary citizen is provided with the
basic goods that enables her or him to lead a life of dignity; that s/he is not compelled to beg for
things that are rightfully hers, and that s/he is not made to suffer for things over which s/he has no
control such as historically handed down poverty, deprivation, ill-health and illiteracy. P.M
Nehru’s speech on the eve of India’s independence had after all promised precisely this transition
from formal to substantive democracy: ‘the service of India’ he was to say, ‘means the service of
millions who suffer…it means the ending of poverty, ignorance and disease and inequality of
opportunity’ 13. But this transition has simply not happened.

Consider India’s somewhat dim record in social development. The country’s position has slipped
from 124th to 127th in the 2003 Human Development Report and it remains at 127 in the 2004
Human Development Report. Though the proportion of people living on less that $1 a day has
declined from 42 percent in 1993/4 to 35 percent in 2001, 40 percent of the world’s poor live in
India. 40 million children out of the world’s total of 115 million children who are out of school
are Indian. Only 58 percent of the country is literate, with women constituting a high proportion
of the non-literate. Child mortality rates under the age of 5 are 93 per 1000 live births; infant
mortality is 67 per 1000 live births, maternal mortality rates in the country are the highest in the
world, and life expectancy in India is 63.3 years, compared to 70.3 years in China. More than 90
percent of polio cases in the world are found in India. Widespread malnutrition, poor
infrastructure in the area of health, and high mortality rates among the poor means that the health
scene is grim. The country has high numbers of hungry people, 233 million, despite the existence
of huge buffer stocks of food. India’s record in providing services-sanitation, clean drinking
water, electricity, housing, and jobs is even bleaker.

It is not, therefore, surprising that 41 percent of the total number of respondents we surveyed told
us that meeting basic needs is a big/one of the biggest problem for them. It is also not surprising
that the percentage ascends from the planned colonies that house the more affluent sections of
society, to the shanty towns and slums that house the poorer sections. For 73 percent of our
respondents who live in shanty-towns, meeting basic needs constitutes a big/one of the biggest
problem, whereas this percentage is 13 for the planned colonies, 30 for the unauthorised
regularised colonies and 45 as far as the residents of the unauthorised unregularised colonies are
concerned. Significantly however, across the board, 89 percent of our respondents opined that
meeting people’s basic need is a big/one of the biggest problems for the country, whereas only 1
percent said that it was not a problem for the country, and 9 percent of the respondents felt that it
is a moderate or a small problem for the country. It is also of some interest to note that across
residential settlements, 80 percent of the respondents are of the view that it is the responsibility of
the government to meet the basic needs of people. Less than 1 percent said that meeting basic
needs is the responsibility of private companies, community association or NGOs. And only 17
percent of our respondents felt that individuals are themselves responsible for meeting basic
needs.
Considering that the provision of basic needs is held to be the fundamental right of citizens in any self-respecting democracy, the question that confronts us is the following: why has Indian state, which after all claims democratic credentials, been unable to resolve the fundamental and somewhat crucial problems that citizens confront in their day to day life? Why has it been unable to assure a life of dignity and freedom from want for a substantial section of its people? Is it because citizens have not translated these problems as compelling political claims upon the government? Is the indifference towards the meeting of basic needs due to the fact that the government is supremely unresponsive to the needs of the people? Or is it that political representatives have failed to represent these political claims adequately, competently, and effectively, in the forums of policy-making?

The answer to the last question is perhaps of some import for any theory of representative democracy. For not only is the representative supposed to mediate the relationship between the state and the citizen, not only is s/he expected to [re]present the interests of her constituency in policy making forums, s/he is expected to ‘stand in’ for the constituent in these forums. To put it differently, the representative is expected to behave exactly as those who are represented would behave, if they were to directly participate in the forums that make policy. And we can more or less presume that if people were to participate directly in these forums, the first thing that they would do is to bring their interest in accessing goods that meet basic needs, to bear on the processes whereby policy is made.

Let me elaborate on this. The concept of ‘interest’ suggests Feinberg, is related to having ‘an interest in something’ say x. And to have an ‘interest’ in x is to have a stake in it, that is to lose or gain depending on what happens to x. Human beings we can more or less assume have an interest in many things, in pursuing or at least in wanting to pursue projects of various kinds for instance. Let us call these projects x. These projects will necessarily plural and necessarily divergent in a complex society: the phenomenon of what is termed moral pluralism. However, whatever be the particular projects or x that different people pursue, and whatever be the interest that they have in pursuing these projects, there is one ‘x’ which all people have a vital interest in. In this case, x stands for access to the basic or to the minimal conditions of life. After all, the basic needs of individuals have to be satisfied before they are able to do anything else. Or that the provision of basic goods is a necessary prerequisite for human action: the capacity to make and pursue projects for instance. Therefore irrespective of what the content of different moral or pragmatic projects may be; basic needs refer to those conditions that are essential for pursuing these projects. Secondly, basic needs have to be satisfied because this leads to the avoidance of harm. For expectedly lack of access to basic needs leads to harm in the shape of poverty, ill-health, homelessness, and illiteracy, all of which damage human beings physically and psychologically.

But what, someone can ask at this point, are basic needs? Does the government have an obligation, and is the representative obliged, to see that every need of every person is met: an individual’s need to drink fine wine with every meal for instance? As a prelude to an answer, we need to sort out the generic concept of ‘need’ from the concept of ‘basic needs’. Most theorists agree that the desire for fine wine belongs to the generic concept of need and that the need for nutritious food belongs to the domain of basic needs. It follows that the concept of basic needs is objective inasmuch as it is independent of the agent’s own perception of what is good for her. A wine drinker may believe that regular intake of wine is a basic need for him, but experts know better. It is more important that our wine drinker consumes a regular and a nutritious diet even if his own preference is for wine over food. Derek Parfit refers to basic needs as the ‘objective list’ theory, which decides what makes someone’s life go best, ‘certain things are good or bad for people, whether or not these people would want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things’.
Other scholars argue that the very objectivity of the concept of basic needs is disagreeable because it results in the domination of expertise over individual perceptions and desires. ‘Prescriptions phrased in terms of “needs’” writes Fitzgerald, ‘are such that they appear to be not merely the demand of one person but one that applies to all human beings whether they know it or not. Thus talk in terms of ‘needs’ appears to get the theorist out of the problem of imposing one’s value preferences upon others. Needs talk has a scientific right about it when the concept is used as if it were non-normative: it seems to open the way to objective expertise’ 19. Theorists worry that when experts take over the domain of basic needs, or indeed any other domain, people’s own ideas of what is good for them may well fly out of the window. However, arguably basic needs are not completely independent of subjective desires or preferences and they cannot be independent of such preferences. Assume for a moment that an individual begins to list the requirements that s/he considers indispensable for life itself. And then consider whether a home, clothing, food, health, and education will not top any such list? If we presume that a consumer starting from scratch begins to acquire some of the resources that s/he needs, basic needs are the desires s/he may be expected to prioritise, before s/he turns to others 20.

Up till this point in the argument I have suggested that whatsoever be the specific interests people have in pursuing their own projects, all people have an interest in having their basic needs met. For unless these needs are met, human beings will not be able to do anything else-take up a satisfying job, form enriching friendships, engage in leisure activities or indeed participate in an activity we call politics. Admittedly basic needs are objective of people’s own perceptions of what is good for them; how much calorie intake they require per day for instance. The consequent danger is that individual perceptions of need can be dismissed as of little or as of no value. However, it is also true that any individual, or at least any right-thinking individual, will necessarily prioritise basic needs; or that these will normally top her or his list of wants, simply because they are necessary pre-conditions for any kind of action on the one hand, and necessary preconditions for the avoidance of harm on the other.

If the satisfaction of basic needs is indispensable for leading a life of some dignity, or a life that is not mired in debasing and mortifying poverty or want; if the satisfaction of basic needs is a necessary pre-requisite for allowing people to pursue projects that they consider worthwhile and for avoiding harm, and if we assume that democracy is meant to assure such a life for its people, then any government that calls itself democratic is morally obliged to see that these needs are met. We do not require, I think, to engage in any elaborate philosophical argument to justify the proposition that democratic governments are under a moral obligation to provide their citizens with basic goods. It is enough that we remind ourselves that democracy rests on the normative premise that each and every individual is of equal value; at an obvious level this presumption is exemplified in the practice of universal adult franchise. And to value human beings is to ensure that (a) they do not come to harm, and (b) that they are enabled to pursue their particular projects. But both these objectives cannot be realised, as suggested above, unless the basic needs of citizens are met. It is this precise reasoning that places a compelling moral obligation on the democratic state to satisfy the basic needs of its citizens. To phrase the point differently, if people do not possess a home to live in, an income to sustain themselves and their families, food that provides adequate nourishment, health that does not impede action, and at least primary education that allows them to comprehend the possibilities that the world offers, they cannot do anything else, neither avoid harm nor pursue their life plans. Basic needs can of course be satisfied in two ways. For the wealthier sections of society the provisioning of basic needs can be routed through the market. For the poorer sections of society, however, the government has the obligation to provide for basic needs, and this is irrespective of the ability of the poor to pay for these goods.

That is that the goods that satisfy basic needs are of such importance that they have to be placed outside the realm of market transactions for those who cannot pay for them. Consequently, the concept of basic needs provides us with a measuring rod to evaluate the depth of a given
democracy’s commitment to human well-being, even if there is political disagreement about precisely what satisfies those needs.

However, any state, howsoever democratic it may be, will find it impossible to gauge the basic needs of the citizens. The size and the complexity of modern societies, as suggested above, prohibit this. It is therefore precisely here that the role of the political representative proves crucial. Or since the representative is charged with representing the interests of her constituents in the forums that make policy, the least that s/he can do is to faithfully present the interests that her constituents have in getting their basic needs met. But if as many as 41 percent of our respondents hold that meeting basic needs is a big or one of the biggest problem that they face, we have to conclude that either (a) these needs have not been represented in the forums of decision making, or (b) if they were represented, they were not represented in such a compelling fashion that the government considered itself morally obliged to design and implement policies that would redress the situation. This by itself may be an adverse comment on the ability or the will of the representatives to adequately or competently re-present the interests of the worse-off in policy making.

I come back to the crisis of representation in India in the section that follows. Here I only wish to suggest that the experience of India’s formal democracy shows us that though party representatives may succeed in mobilising constituencies during election time, they seem to do little else: articulate the case of the poorer sections of society in the forums of policy making, bargain for better social policies and even better implementation of social policy, and in sum act exactly as deprived citizens would if they were given a chance to participate in decision making. Since the representative has ostensibly failed to discharge her primary responsibility, it is not surprising as we shall see below, that for the ordinary citizen the political representative seems to be simply irrelevant.

**The Crisis of Representation in India**

Deep rooted scepticism about the ability of political parties to deliver what they promise in plenty during elections is not new to Indian politics. Mahatma Gandhi had on the eve of independence suggested that the Indian National Congress should disband as a political party, and that its members should proceed to engage in social work for the benefit of the people. More than conscious of the propensity of modern forms of politics to appropriate political agendas for narrow, partisan, and power driven ends, Mahatma Gandhi was to call for democracy without a centralised party system. However, despite Gandhiji’s warnings, the leadership in the country proceeded to institutionalise representative government in the country. However, by the early 1970s, the demand for a ‘non-party’ political process came up once again. Even as the socialist leader J.P Narayan launched a massive political movement against the authoritarian policies adopted by the central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, even as he led a major movement for ‘total revolution’ in the country, he was to call for a ‘party-less democracy’ for India. And many Indians concurred with his view, for not only had political parties failed to discharge their responsibility towards the people, they had rapidly degenerated into corrupt, unrepresentative, and power hungry machines.

In short, in the space of a little over two decades, the Congress party had lost its ability to inspire confidence that (a) as a political party it could represent the interests of the people, and (b) as a party that controlled the government it could satisfy the needs of the people. This is cause for some regret, for it was precisely the ability of the Congress to represent and accommodate all class, caste, and group interests within its party organisation that had been acclaimed by scholars. In fact, Rajni Kothari was to conceptualise the Indian model of democracy as the ‘one party dominant system’ or the ‘Congress System’. For Kothari the USP of the Congress system lay in the fact that groups and individuals carried on the rather complex activity of negotiating and bargaining with the leadership within the party organisation. This, Kothari seemed to imply, not
only made the task of the parliamentary opposition redundant, it allowed various groups to represent the needs of their constituents and have their demands satisfied, within the framework provided by the party.

In 1967 Myron Weiner exploring the reasons for the success of the Congress, suggested that the reason why the party could maintain its hegemony was that it could find a place for all. It could for instance incorporate those who were dedicated to social service and who were moved by an egalitarian spirit. ‘The spirit of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation’ he wrote, ‘which had a long honourable tradition in Hinduism and which was reformulated by Gandhi has a place in the local Congress party’23. But it could also provide a place for those who wanted status and power, for people who had specific grievances and demands, for those people who were looking for conviviality, and for those who were committed to national integration, economic development, secularism, and representative government24. In short, the Congress party represented, accommodated, and incorporated a broad spectrum of caste, religious and regional interests on the one hand, and classes on the other, for over twenty years after independence.

That was the primary reason why the Congress was voted into power in the first three elections after independence with a substantial majority. In the first elections held 1951/52, the party polled 45 percent of the total votes that had been cast, and secured 74.44 percent of the seats in the popular house in Parliament; the Lok Sabha. In the second election held in 1957, the Congress obtained almost 48 percent of the total vote share and 75.10 percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha. And in 1962, the vote share of the Congress remained at 45 percent and it secured 73 percent of the seats in the popular house of Parliament. Though the hegemony of the party was broken in the state legislatures 1967, it was only in 1977 that the Congress lost power at the centre. The party came back to power at the centre in 1980, in 1984, and in 1991, but its vote share diminished considerably. In the 2004 elections for instance, though the Congress has come to power at the centre, it obtained only 27 percent of the votes cast and secured only 145 seats in the Lok Sabha.

In sum the role of the Congress as a representative and as a mediator of public interest ebbed after 1967 in state politics, and after the early years of the 1970s in national politics. And it never completely recovered its monopoly in the period thereafter. This had some significant implications. For the decline of the Congress led to a generalised crisis of representation, for the parties that emerged as an alternative to the Congress, fared no better when it came to representing and accommodating the interests of the people. The Bharatiya Janata Party, which successfully came to challenge the Congress in 1996 at the national level, has not found it expedient to represent the marginal sections of society, and its support base remains confined to the upper classes and the upper castes. The regional political parties, which since the late 1990s have some presence at the centre, openly declare that they intend to cater to the interests of only one section of society, normally caste groupings, as in the case of the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, and the Samajwadi Party. But even this limited form of representation does not seem to have taken the problem of basic needs seriously. If it had done so, then the provision of basic needs would not have been seen as a big/biggest problem by our respondents.

The reasons for the decline of the Congress system and consequently for the decline of the system of representation are many and need separate treatment. Here I can detail only some of them. For one, as Richard Sisson and Ramashroy Roy suggested, the period from 1966 to 1991 was marked by the ‘organisational atrophy’ of the Congress. During this time ‘the party came to approximate a shifting reservoir of political aspirants, defined and selected by a strong and purposeful leader with unparalleled name recognition, and with demonstrated support within the electorate25. Even as under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and then P.M Rajiv Gandhi power came to be centralised in the person of the leader, the ability of the Congress to address and negotiate popular demands dwindled greatly. In other words, the same Congress that had specialised in addressing, negotiating, and resolving demands of different groups within the framework of its
own organisation became the captive of the leader. This expectedly proved disastrous for the
capacity of the party to represent interests and meet demands adequately. ‘The once impressive
decentralised organization of the Congress party’, wrote Bardhan in 1984, ‘has largely
disintegrated; the principle of popular representation at different organisational levels of the Party
has been abandoned; [and] nominated to co-opted political operators and gangsters control much
of the political machinery’ 26. It is not surprising that in all this, individual members of the party
came to be preoccupied with accessing the supreme leader more, and representing their
constituents less.

Secondly, the decline of the Congress took place at precisely the time when popular expectations
of parties and of the government had risen dramatically. By the end of the 1960s people expected
different things of the government than they did in the 1950s and in the 1960s. This was perhaps
natural. In the two decades following independence the Congress was considered legitimate by a
majority of the people, simply because the party and its leadership were associated with the
freedom struggle, even though the promises that the leaders had made had remained unrealised.
By the late 1960s, however, an entirely new generation had grown to maturity in post-
independence India, a generation that had no memory of the freedom struggle, and a generation
that measured the achievements of a party in terms of its ability to meet the aspirations of the
people. Moreover, the rhetoric of Nehruvian socialism and the idea of planning for development
had generated both enormous hopes of the government and a sense of entitlements. Driven by
populist imagery and radical demagoguery, the people came to expect that the state and the party
in power would deliver primary education and subsidize higher education, guarantee health,
remove poverty, generate jobs and incomes, institutionalise inter-group equalities, remove
inequalities within the group, and protect the needy, the vulnerable, and the poor. But the
Congress, which at that time controlled both power and resources, had not only failed to
emancipate the country from poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment it had under the leadership of
P.M Indira Gandhi become authoritarian in the garb of populism. And this led to restlessness in
major parts of the country.

By the late 1960s, simmering discontent came to pervade large parts of the country as groups
mobilised to target an unresponsive state and an equally unresponsive party system. Since the mid
1960s, wrote Atul Kohli, ‘the surface manifestation of this process has been widespread activism
outside of the established political channels that has often led to violence…Below this surface lies
an important cause of these political problems: disintegration of India’s major political
institutions, especially the decline of its premier political entity, the Congress party’ 27. Since the
Congress had lost its capacity to represent interests and resolve conflict, it just could not contain
the explosion of political discontent through democratic means. Given the inability of the party to
meet aspirations and resolve problems, new groups entering the political arena resorted to
agitation and violence to press their demands upon the state. This was more than evident when in
1973 and 1974, political discontent spilled outside the channels provided by the party system and
people, particularly students in Gujarat and Bihar, took to the streets 28.

Even as disgruntlement coalesced rapidly under the leadership of J.P Narayan to mount a
challenge to the political system, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, leader of the same Congress
party that had led the people into independence, imposed internal emergency from 1975-1977.
The emergency not only suspended representative democracy, it pulverized civil liberties and
froze political activism. The paradox however is that though the emergency suspended
constitutional democracy, stifled civil liberties, and pulverised political life in the country, it also
animated an entire range of social struggles. It is of some interest that these movements erupted in
a space outside the sphere of party politics, reinforcing the belief that the party system was
neither here nor there when it came to representing political demands 29.
As the decline of all institutions and particularly of the institutions of representative democracy gave rise to several mass based political movements and grass roots activism, scholars were to turn their faces away from the party and the state and towards civil society. D.L Sheth for instance began to speak hopefully of a ‘non-party political process’ in civil society. Similarly, Rajni Kothari, putting aside all expectations that the Congress or indeed any other party would deliver, came to vest his expectations in grass root organisations. By the 1980s, Kothari was to speak of the ‘vacuum in the traditional superstructure of the liberal polity that was supposed to render it humane despite powerful trends that the real counter-trends are to be found-not in the party system, not in the arena of electoral politics and of State power…In their place is emerging a new arena of counteraction, of countervailing tendencies, of counter-cultural movements and more generally of a counter-challenge to existing paradigms of thought and action]. These counter-cultural movements, it is important to note, arose as a reaction partly to the failure of the state to deliver, and partly in response to the inability of accepted modes of representative politics to address deep-rooted demands for social change. “By the late 1980s” wrote Omvedt, “the predominant feature of Indian politics had become the ‘new social movements’ of women, dalits, and low castes, peasants, farmers, and tribals, as well as ethnicity-based struggles for autonomy or independence on the periphery.”

Given the non-performance of political parties, it is not surprising that the anti-caste movement, the struggle for gender justice, the movement for civil liberties, for a sound environment, and against mega development projects that have displaced thousands of poor tribals and hill dwellers, the movement against child labour, for the right to information, for shelter, for primary education, and for food security have mobilised in civil society. The fact that vital issues related to livelihoods, to the fulfilment of basic needs, and for justice were not taken up by political parties but by civil society organisations acted to propel hopes in civil society as an alternative to the non-performing state and an unresponsive party system. By the year 2000, it was estimated that grass roots movements, social movements, non-party political formations, social action groups, movement-groups and in general non-party groups, numbered almost 20-30,000. What we recognise today as movement-groups, writes Sheth, ‘emerged and were consolidated in spaces made available to them by the decline of mainstream institutions of representative democracy: the legislature, elections, political parties, and trade unions’.

That most scholars came to favour civil society organisations over the political party is clear. Whether popular perceptions mirror this shift is unclear. We cannot assume that people stopped becoming members of political parties and became instead members of civil society organisations. Some people are members of both, some are members of one organisation, and some are not members of any organisation. People can support one organisation at a time, or both at the same time or at different times. People can for instance belong to a women’s group and canvass for its agenda, and yet vote for a political party of which they are not a member, or perhaps not even an active supporter at election time, for reasons that are more strategic than ideological. However, when it comes to government policy the shift from reliance on party functionaries to civil society organisations, particularly non-governmental organisations, is more than visible. The non-governmental sector in particular came to be heavily involved in the execution of government policy particularly in the realm of social policy. The Seventh Five-Year plan [1985-1990] was to initiate this trend, showing as it did a major bias towards dependence on the voluntary sector as an agent of social development. The seventh plan in effect sanctioned a perceptible shift both to civil society organizations and to the market in matters of service delivery. Thereupon, whereas the central government had earlier spent Rs 500 million each year through non-governmental organizations [NGOs] on social sectors, the Seventh Five Year Plan increased the funds available to NGOs operating in this sector to Rs 2,000 million. The ministries that subsequently came to rely heavily on NGOs for the execution of their mandate are the ministries of rural development, health and family welfare, social justice and empowerment,
human resource development, and the ministry of environment and forests. In the 1990s plan allocation for poverty alleviation and social development registered a sharp increase, and expectedly NGOs benefited from all this even as they shouldered more and more social functions that hitherto fell within the provenance of the state.

In 1994 the Planning Commission, after a meeting with almost 100 NGOs, cabinet ministers, and high ranking government officers, issued a document titled an ‘Action Plan to Bring About a Collaborative Relationship between Voluntary Organizations and Government’. The document stated that the objective of NGOs should be ‘to mobilise and organize the poor with a view to empowering them, breaking the culture of silence and dependence and converting the lowest strata of society from passive recipients of doles to active participants in the process of planned development’. NGOs were accordingly given the responsibility of looking after community forestry, education, health, and other kinds of service delivery. In Delhi the role that is accorded to NGOs by the state government in vital areas is indeed impressive. In both the 9th Plan and the 10th Plan the state government has stressed the need for the cooperation of, and partnership with NGOs in three crucial areas: public health and medical care, general education, and urbanization and environmental hazards. It is not surprising that the NGO sector expanded dramatically in the wake of these developments. A recent study has calculated that the total number of non-profit organisations in India is more than 1.2 million and that 20 million people work for these organisations either in a voluntary capacity or for a salary.

The tenth plan currently in operation in the country has strengthened this thrust. ‘With the acceptance of market liberalism and globalisation’ states the Tenth Five Year Plan [2002-2007] document: ‘it is expected that the State yields to the market and the civil society in many areas where it, so far, had a direct but distortionary and inefficient presence...It also includes the role of the State as a development catalyst where, perhaps, civil society has better institutional capacity. At the same time, with the growth of markets and the presence of an aware and sensitive civil society, many developmental functions as well as functions that provide stability to the social order have to be progressively performed by the market and the civil society organisations. It means extension of the market and civil society domain at the expense of the State in some areas’.

The tenth plan accordingly suggests that the role of voluntary organisations, non-profit making companies, corporate bodies, cooperatives, and trusts be strengthened in social and economic development, making them thereby partners in development. In sum, the non-governmental sector has come to play a large role in collective lives, because it has taken over a number of activities that concern ordinary people, from legal and human rights activism, women’s rights, and environment, to training people to participate in local self-government bodies.

Admittedly, the shift from political to civil society organisations can be seen as welcome for a number of reasons. For one, the practices of civil society organisations promise an exit from centrally controlled, bureaucratic, hierarchical, and oligarchic party structures solely preoccupied with winning the next election. Secondly, presumably that a multiplicity of agencies in civil society are able to respond immediately to problems and issues that require swift resolution because they are notably free from rigid and tiresome constraints that characterize older forms of representation. Not unexpectedly, NGOs have been promoted by international development institutions like the World Bank and donor agencies because they are seen to possess certain properties: they are relatively unburdened with large bureaucracies, they are more flexible and more receptive to innovation than political parties are, and they are able to identify and respond to the needs of the grass roots because they are in close touch with their constituencies. What we however need to know is-and this may be a question that is of considerable relevance to democratic theory: has this reliance on NGOs instead of political parties as agents of development inspired confidence in the people? Do people think that NGOs, which now subcontract for the
state in crucial areas of social policy, can help them solve problems? The findings of the research project may help us to answer this question.

**Implications of the Crisis of Representation**

We began our exploration of the crisis of representation by asking people which agency they generally approached or would approach to solve their problems. Do they approach the government, or political parties, or take the help of a ‘big man’, or petition the judiciary, or resort to direct action, or engage in self-help endeavours? Our findings are of some interest: they show that only 2.2 percent of our respondents had approached the judiciary, only 8.4 percent usually approach ‘big men’ for help, hardly 10 percent of the people had resorted to direct action, and only 17 percent of the respondents engage in self-provisioning. Only 28 percent of our respondents had approached political parties to solve their problems. The largest percentage of our respondents that is 36 percent had approached the government directly. Out of this number less than one percent approached the government through the political party representative. About 75 percent of the 36 percent that had approached the government said that they had taken the help of their acquaintances and family to do so. Not a single person had taken the help of NGOs to approach the government.

During the course of the analysis of our findings, it became obvious that even when people approached the government to resolve their problems they would rather take the help of neighbourhood acquaintances, rather than that of political parties or any other organisation, to do so. It is not difficult to conclude that people by and large lack faith in any agency to address their problems. For our data not only shows us that people have little faith in political parties, but also that they do not seem to repose much faith in civil society organisations.

This finding is reinforced when we consider the responses to the question of which organisation, in their estimation, is concerned about their needs. About 52 percent of our respondents felt that none of the political parties are concerned about their problems. When it came to religious and caste groups, 91 percent of the people felt that none of them do anything to resolve the problems of the inhabitants [most of those who opined that religious groups are concerned about people’s problems belong to the constituent organizations of the Hindu Right- the Rashtriya Swayamsevak
Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad]. Among the 48 percent of those respondents who were of the opinion that political parties do something for them, 72 percent said that parties do a lot and 26 percent felt they do little to resolve the constituent’s problems. As far as trade unions are concerned, 80 percent of our respondent’s felt that unions were not concerned about their respondent’s problems and this happened to be the standard response we got across colonies. 48 percent of our respondents believed that neighbourhood groups do nothing to resolve problems, 29 percent said they do something and 12 percent said they do a lot.

**Chart 1**

**Organisations Concerned about Respondent’s Problems**

[Value as percentage of total responses]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Parties</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Religious Groups</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>Hindu (RSS, VHP,</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>P.M</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ramlila Committees)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>C.M</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Parties</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Sikh (SGPC)</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>M.P</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>MLA + Councillor</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party or Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As far as individual office bearers are concerned, 36 percent felt that the elected members of the state assemblies and elected members of the municipal corporation—not note members of Parliament—were concerned about their problems. Given the fact that a majority of our respondents exhibit little confidence in political parties, and given the fact people would rather approach the government with the help of acquaintances from the neighbourhood or family, the reliance on elected MLAs and Councillors seems anachronistic. The anachronism only sorts itself out when we recollect that the MLA or the Councillor, unlike the Member of Parliament, is normally a resident of the constituency that he or she represents, or at least that he or she are familiar with the constituency and accessible to the residents of the constituency. Since MLA’s and Councillors are either located in the neighbourhood, are familiar, and are accessible, it seems feasible that they are viewed in this capacity and not in their capacity as members of a political party. This conclusion is borne out by the fact that the largest number of respondents was of the opinion that neighbourhood associations were relatively more useful when it came to problem solving compared to unions and community based organisations.
The reasons why people have not been able to acquire confidence in civil society organisations such as NGOs, the voluntary sector, and other informal groupings and ‘do-gooders’ have arguably to do with one main factor; the lack of accountability of the NGO sector. No one quite knows who the sector is responsible to despite the fact that many NGOs play a central role in the provenance of service delivery. What is more significant for the theory of representative democracy is that distrust in the ability of the party representative to represent popular interests has not been paralleled by the institutionalisation of trust in the ability of civil society organisations to do so.

**Revisiting the Crisis of Representation Thesis**

The concept of representation has in scholarly debates, been found wanting for a number of reasons. In addition to the problems mentioned above—the bureaucratisation of political parties, an excessive pre-occupation with acquiring power, and insensitivity to the needs and interests of those who are being represented—other shortcomings can be identified. Consider for one that both the act of representation and the representative tend to acquire a great deal of autonomy from what is being represented. This happens simply because the representative has to aggregate plural and often conflicting interests in order to represent them. However, strict aggregation is just not possible, considering that most interests are bound to clash with each other and given the plurality of projects that people pursue. Expectedly the representative acquires enormous power to sift through articulated interests, select those that s/he considers worthy of representing, prioritises the agendas that appear most viable to him or her over others, and put them forward in the forums that make policy. This really means that the representative has tremendous discretion to pick and choose between competing demands, filter these demands through the ideological prism of the
political party of which s/he is a member, or indeed manipulate these claims for partisan political ends? There is indeed a paradox, as Hannah Pitkin had suggested, which is embodied in the very concept of representation. Something is represented, but at the same time that which does the representing must have characteristics of its own. Pitkin had accordingly suggested that limits must be established on political representation in order to delimit its scope, for the constituents are also capable of independent judgement and not just charges to be taken care of. Representatives therefore ought not to stray too far from the objective wishes of those they represent, and when they do persistently stray they are obliged to explain this to their constituents. In short we may be able to discern a slippage between the interests of those who are being represented and the act of representation. For this reason, the ability of representative democracy to address and negotiate popular demands has been particularly challenged by scholars who subscribe to participatory democracy.

Other scholars go further in their critique of the practices of representation. They dispute the assumption that we can discover some ‘objective wish’ of the constituents, or some ‘pre-political’ or ‘raw’ opinion or interests, which can be used to distinguish between the interests of those who are represented, and the practices of representation. For it is undeniable that the representative possesses the power both to shape and constitute these demands in a number of ways. This is not new; for long it has been agreed that representatives do more than just represent in some ‘mirror like’ fashion an inchoate entity called public opinion. Edmund Burke for instance had suggested that the task of the party representative was wider than envisaged by the proponents of representative democracy. ‘It ought to be the happiness and glory of a Representative, to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents’ stated Burke. ‘But’, went on Burke ‘his unbiased opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you; to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the Law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion’.

The tasks of government and legislation, Burke argued, are matters for reason and judgment and not of inclination. Therefore, there cannot be a division between those who deliberate and those who decide. Representatives should rejoice that their constituents hold opinions, for this is the right of the constituents. But constituents cannot give authoritative instructions or mandates that the members is bound blindly to obey, and argue for, if it is contrary to his convictions, his concerns, and his judgements. Parliament concluded Burke is not a congress of ambassadors who must maintain the interests of those they represent; it is a deliberative body of one nation and one interest. This would really mean that the representative’s discretion and judgment is more important than merely standing in for his or her constituents and mirroring their opinions, their needs, and their interests. The practices of representation in short are separated from what has to be represented.

Today, however, scepticism about the role of the political representative has gone further than Burke’s suggestion that the representative has to employ discretion and judgment when it comes to policy making. Laclau is clear about this: ‘no pure relation of representation’, he argues, ‘is obtainable because it is of the essence of the process of representation that the representative has to contribute to the identity of what is represented’. Representatives do not in other words only register the will of the people; they are engaged in the determining of the will and thereby of the identity of the political community. Representation may well be the constitutive and thus the decisive moment in the construction of the political will. It may be in sum more about the play of power and dominance than about bringing the needs of people to bear upon policy. And citizens as well as their needs may well be constructed by practices of representation. There is nothing in
short representative about representation, critics argue, and people who see the representative as the embodiment of democracy, have in effect, been short changed. However as our research findings show, it is difficult to believe that people’s own ideas about what is their interest are completely constituted by the representative’s notion of what these interests should be. If this were indeed the case, then our respondents would not have expressed a lack of confidence in the ability of all modes of representation, political parties, caste and religious groups, ‘big men’, and NGOs, to solve their problems. If they were constituted by the practices of representation, it would almost be impossible for them to gauge or evaluate the adequacy of these practices. Because the citizens of Delhi expressed a lack of confidence in the ability of political parties, trade unions, and NGOs to help them resolve their everyday problems, this could only be because people are able to discern a slippage between what is represented and what ought to be represented. Perhaps the ability to discern the slippage is largely due to the fact that living conditions of the poorer sections of society are so wretched and dismal. The failure of representatives to represent or address the basic interests of their constituents is all too painfully obvious. If perchance either political or civil society representatives had discharged their duties responsively, these living conditions need not have been quite so intolerable.

In sum, the crisis of representation simply lies in the fact that no organisation has been able to inspire confidence that it can represent people’s needs adequately, or indeed press demands so compellingly that the government is necessarily obliged to do something about them. Our findings tell us that people have indeed lost faith in the ability of political parties to represent their interests in having their basic needs met in forums of decision making. But this disenchantment with political parties has not led to the institutionalisation of trust in newer forms of representation such as the non-governmental sector. In short people (a) have little faith in any organization, whether it belongs to the political or to the civil sphere to either represent them and their interests or to help them resolve their day to day problems, (b) they by and large are convinced that no organisation is concerned with their problems, some of which are indeed severe because they pertain to the minimal conditions of life itself, (c) they would rather rely on personal associations in the neighbourhood or on their family to solve problems, and (d) with the help of their personal contacts or with the help of people who are familiar, they would rather approach the government directly. It appears that citizens would prefer to establish direct contact with the government than rely on mediations that are provided by political parties and civil society organisations.

**In Lieu of a Conclusion**

What are the implications of these findings, we may ask, for the state of representative democracy in India? The answer of course depends on how we conceive of the task of the representative in particular; and the purpose of representative democracy in general. If the tenets of representative democracy merely imply that (a) citizens authorise the representative to speak for them through elections, and (b) that the candidate who is elected has the legitimate power to participate in the making of decisions, then democracy in India scores on both counts. At this level it has worked very well. In April-May 2004, 58.3 percent of the electorate participated in the exercise to elect representatives to the lower house of parliament, a percentage that was only slightly lower than the voter turn out in the last general elections held in 1999. More significantly the voters exercised their franchise to throw out the incumbent government [the National Democratic Alliance led by the Bharatiya Janata Party] and vote a new government in [the United Progressive Alliance led by the Congress party]. Political observers were to comment enthusiastically and ecstatically that once again the Indian electorate had proved that it is both discerning and astute. The results of the poll were indeed unexpected, defying as they did the prediction of most poll pundits, let alone the expectations of those who stood for elections. The resilience of Indian
democracy and the maturity of the Indian voter has, not unsurprisingly, become a matter of some international acclaim.

Yet whether the act of representation is only meant to elect a candidate to office; or whether it is only meant to bestow legitimacy on the candidate by the fact, is debatable. For an expanded concept of representative democracy is about enabling the participation of the ordinary citizen in the process of decision making. Since direct participation has proved impossible in large and complex societies, the representative is expected to ‘stand in’ for those he or she represents. Representative systems accordingly can be evaluated by the extent to which representatives are able to proxy for those that they represent, that is the extent to which they act in ways that approximate the ways citizens would act in forums of direct or participatory democracy. Secondly political representatives must also stand in a relationship of accountability to those whom they represent. But if the citizens who we surveyed lack confidence in the ability of the representative do something about the pressing problems that they are confronted with day after day, representatives could not be performing their job too well. This is not to suggest that representatives never pay attention to the interests of their constituents, or that they should not be free to exercise their discretion on important matters. All that I am suggesting is that if representatives are mandated to pursue interests that are vital for the life chances of their constituents, the least that they can do is to prioritise these issues over others and to ensure that something is done about these issues. On these counts, representative democracy has not done too well.

The consequences of all this for our understanding of representative democracy in India are not slight. For one, since political parties seem to have failed to represent the basic interests of their constituents, the avatar of representative democracy that we find in India is a formal one, largely confined to successfully organised elections. Formal and legal democracy remains in the process de-linked from social and economic democracy, which in most tomes of political theory is seen as a pre-requisite of democracy itself. And Indian democracy continues to function within a set of contradictions-successful political democracy existing amidst substantial poverty and hunger and want. Secondly, excessive reliance on personalised contacts to resolve problems, because neither political parties nor civil society organisations inspire confidence in the minds of the citizens, does not bode well for the future of democracy. Overt dependence on personal ties may lead to the consolidation of patron-client relationships, which can prove to be profoundly undemocratic, as well as isolate people from each other. This pre-empt the forging of solidarity on crucial issues that are common to all, in civil society. For individuals instead of coming together to demand of the government what is rightfully theirs, tend to press for benefits for either themselves or for their friends and acquaintances. This fragments civil society, which is an essential precondition for a healthy democracy and adds to the power of the state. Finally, if as our data shows citizens would rather approach the government directly or along with their acquaintances to solve their problems, surely this constitutes an adverse comment on the ability, the willingness, the capacity, and the competence of all modes of representation in the country, to ‘stand in’ for their constituents.
End Notes

1 The survey that was conducted by research scholars affiliated to the Developing Countries Research Centre, University of Delhi, and directed by me, is part of a wider internationally comparative project on ‘Rights, Representation, and the Poor: Comparing Large Developing Democracies-India, Mexico, and Brazil’. The project is part of the programme of the Future State Research Centre at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, and is funded by DFID. The project seeks to compare the impact of globalisation and liberalisation on the capacities of different poor social groups to obtain political representation and solve collective problems in five cities. The other project partners are John Harriss of the London School of Economics, Peter P. Houtzager of IDS Sussex, Adrian G Lavalle of CEBRAP and the Pontificia Universidade Catolica de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, and K. Nagraj of the Madras Institute of Development Studies. The five cities are Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Delhi, Coimbatore, and Bangalore.

2 John Harriss and Peter P. Houtzager, Rights, Representation and the Poor: Project Statement (IDS, University of Sussex 2002)

3 I have dealt with this in some detail in my earlier work State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory’, (Delhi, Sage, 1995), see the introduction.

4 In addition we surveyed 229 civil society organizations in order to map out patterns of associational life in the city. The total number of surveys carried out in the city therefore total 1630.

5 The MCD administers 94 percent of the territory of Delhi.

6 Unauthorised colonies refer to the conditions of their origin: in the sale of land by private entrepreneurs without government permission. Some of these colonies have been regularised by the Delhi government; others continue to be unregularised. Whereas planned colonies are
provided with the highest degree of infrastructure and services, jhuggi jhopri’s or squatter settlements and slums are provided with either low or no infrastructure or services at all.


9 I agree with Iris Marion Young that the task of the representative is wider than just representing the interests of her constituents in forums of decision-making. Young suggests that the political representative has three kinds of tasks on hand. Firstly, the representative should look after the interests that we take as our own and which we share with others. Secondly, it is important that the principles, values, and priorities that help people define the ends that they have set for themselves should be represented. Thirdly, representatives who are in the business of discussing and voting on policies should represent the perspectives of their constituents. Iris Marion Young, Inclusion and Democracy, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter 4. In this essay however I focus only on the representation of interests.

10 Scholars wonder whether the representative has a moral obligation to represent the interests of those who have not voted for her. It is however generally assumed that the representative treats, or at least should treat everyone in her constituency as of equal importance, even those who had opposed her candidature. This is the moral imperative of representation.

11 This is not to say that deep disagreements about how the representative should behave did not dodge the notion of representation. Disagreement over whether the representative should act as if she had the mandate to pursue policies favoured by the constituents, or whether she should be a trustee of the public interest and follow her own reason as Edmund Burke had famously argued, continue to bedevil the concept of representation. Hannah Pitkin was to ask ‘can both views be right? When they seem to support opposite and incompatible conclusions about the duty of a
representative?’ Hannah. F. Pitkin ‘Commentary, the Paradox of Representation’ in J.R Pennock and J.W Chapman edited Representation (New York, Atherton Press, 1968), pg 41

12 The late historian Ravinder Kumar was to argue that it ‘would be no exaggeration to assert that in its demographic scale, the liberation movement in India was probably unsurpassed by any comparable movement in world history’. See Ravinder Kumar, The Emergence of Modern India: Retrospect and Prospect, (Shimla Indian Institute of Advanced Study, and Manohar Publications New Delhi, 1990) pg 29.


14 We interpreted the concept of basic needs to the respondents as food, shelter, and clothing.


16 The classic statement on this has of course been made by John Rawls, in his A Theory of Justice (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972)

17 For Streeten basic needs can be conceptualized, ‘in terms of minimum specified quantities of things as food, clothing, shelter, water, and sanitation that are necessary to prevent ill health, undernourishment and the like’ Paul Streeten, First Things First, Meeting Basic Human Needs in Developing Countries, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981), pg 25

18 Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons,(Oxford, Clarendon, 1984), pg 499


20 For an excellent discussion on this see Partha Dasgupta, An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution, (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1995).

Rajni Kothari, Politics in India, (New Delhi, Orient Longmans, 1970)


As Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph put it, the new generation judged the party less in the light of its historic role and more on the basis of its retrospective and prospective political performance. It is not surprising that the political capital that the Congress party had reaped ‘badly dwindled’. See their ‘Organisational Adaptation of the Congress Under Rajiv Gandhi’s Leadership’ in Richard Sisson and Ramashray Roy, edited The Changing Basis of Congress Support, volume 1, pp 85-102 in pg 88.

India was not alone in this. The inhabitants of Western societies were to make roughly the same complaint: that of the unresponsiveness of the state, the indifference of the bureaucracy, and the pulverisation of the party system. In the U.S., theorists had complained for long that elections and political parties seemed to have become the pawns of the political elite. In the 1960s the ‘new left’, the ‘sit ins’, the ‘direct action’ movements had already raised into question the efficacy of
the system of representation. Discontent with the party system continued to mount with Walter Dean Burnham arguing that in the U.S, political parties had, since 1900, declined as system of action. They won elections, and managed tensions between factions within the party, but they had not acted as forces for collective purposes and action. Indeed elections for Burnham had become ‘candidate image affairs for which only the wealthy or those close to the wealthy need apply’.


32 Gail Omvedt Reinventing Revolution (New York, M.E. Sharpe 1993), pg xii,


34 Ibid, pg 46

35 Some grass roots movements distinguish themselves from service or humanitarian NGOs because they see the latter as apolitical.

36 PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia) and John Hopkins University, Invisible yet Widespread: The Non-Profit Sector in India, (Delhi, PRIA, 2003), p 5,11.

37 Tenth Five Year Plan 2002-2007, vol 1, Governance and Implementation ( Delhi, Government of India, Planning Commission, 2003), p 181
38 I have dealt with this in my ‘Governance and pluralisation of state, Implications for democratic citizenship’, Economic and Political Weekly, vol 38, no 28, (12th to 18th July 2003) pp 2957-2968.


41 Ernesto Laclau, Emancipation(s), (London Verso, 1996) p 87.