Short Communication

Redefining Elite Power in the Changing Context of the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The article questions the general attitude toward elites and elitism in India and abroad. The piece highlights the historiography of human evolution and governance structure where "rule by elites" is found to be a non-detachable character. The theory of elite-rule has been found in the writings of ancient political philosopher such as Aristotle. Proponents for elite-rule continue in the modern era and are reflected in the writings of political theorists such as C.W. Mills and M. Pareto.

The article further highlights the practical continuity of the elite-rule in politics, economic and corporate organizations across the globe, and in our society. It examines and analyses high and low points of elite power in history. The piece explores the high points in history when a group of few dedicated and selfless patriots come together and form a consensus to write future Constitutions of the two largest democracies in the world based on secularism, equality, justice and sovereignty. The low points in history are marked by persecutions, massacres and other form of oppression carried out against ethnic and religious minorities in Africa, Europe and India – to cite a few examples.

The article attempts to explore if there has been a change of attitude towards the usage of elitism and elite power in India in the 21st society. The article seeks to find out an alternative route to elitist hegemony. It suggests that if the world is to live in peace and resolve some of the most pressing socio-economic issues of the present century, it needs to reform or transform.

Keywords: elite power; elitism; India; justice; minority.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world where all work together, share everything they have, govern the polity and society through collective decision-making and yet find peace and happiness! Has history been so peaceful and egalitarian? If we turn the clock back and analyze history writings, the history of humankind has been a collection of stories of how small and powerful empires, kingdoms and states under powerful rulers have conquered a vast area of territory and people, colonized the masses, their lands and shaped their futures. Hardly the world has been one and never we were one with ourselves. Whether we talk of empires in ancient and medieval times or we talk of modern nation-states, history has been largely shaped by elites.

One of the earliest political Philosopher Plato, in his *Republic*, wrote that there would be no end of troubles of states or humanity till philosophers were kings. Centuries after Plato, Benito Mussolini, a Fascist dictator in the 20th century Italy, states that "The crowd doesn't have to know. It must believe. If we only give them faith that mountains can be moved, they will accept the illusion that mountains are moveable, and thus an illusion may become real" (Mussolini). The belief that a small and superior elite group of individuals can decide the fate of millions has been reinforced generations after generations. Thus, history seems to repeatedly recall us of the inevitability of elitism and appears to justify why this has been a norm.

In Politics

C. Wright Mills in his *The Power Elite (1956)* opines that the ruling elites in the United States comprise three sets of loosely inter-connected groups. They are: high ranking politicians, major corporate owner and board members, and high-level military officers. He argues that they form a tight elite group having commonly shared interests and beliefs which explains their dominance and control of highest positions in politics, business and social class hierarchy.

If that is the case of an advanced capitalist state, it is also true for a developing country like India which is struggling to uplift nearly 60 percent of its approximately 1.35 billion populations. The trilateral close nexus among high-ranking politicians, big corporate owners and popular media houses in India is not a classified matter anymore. Election expenditures of a big party often run into millions of dollars which are donated by corporate billionaires. Media houses influenced public opinion by projecting a party or known political faces. Today, Indian media houses are criticized for inability to maintain neutrality in their news content. The three sets of group work closely, although independent of each other, when they need the most. Thus, Indian politics operates in 3-D and often the masses are restricted to ritualistic functions such as voter registration, listening to candidates' promises and casting their votes on the fateful day.

The foremost function of citizens before elections such as articulation of common interests, agenda setting, getting the candidates to participate in debates and discussions to test their competency, accountability, transparency are subterfuged using money and power. The end result is India remains far behind on every indicators of human development. Common citizens face the wrath of bad-governance and misleading in a few months after.

In international politics, the United Nations' power structure is crudely distributed among five major powers which were the allies during the Second World War. The voices of small yet confident, competent and responsible countries are sidelined in any major international negotiating forum. Be it on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation, on climate change and sustainable energy reforms, on restructuring the global political and economic order and so on. Small countries remain neglected and worst part is that they have been unable to seriously address this together.

In Economy and Corporate Sector

In the world of business, corporations and companies owned and run by dynamic and committed techno-czars such as Google (Larry Page), YouTube, Facebook (Mark Zuckerberg), Amazon (Jeff Bezos) and others dominate the internet and social media which have become basic necessities for billions to connect with each other across the globe. If we look at the global trade, top ten merchandise traders accounted for 51 percent of the total global trade among WTO member-states in 2012 whereas 42 percent of the accounted trade was shared by more than 100 developing countries of the WTO. The top three countries – the United States, China and Japan – share 41.8 percent of the global GDP in 2014 according to IMF database. This is six years ago! More than 40 percent of the vote share in IMF is owned by six countries - the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and China respectively according to IMF figures. The share of top ten of 250 international companies in retail sector was 29 percent in 2013 according to a report by UNI Global Union.

In Society

The world itself is diverse. If we magnify to study a country, India can serve as a well-suited example. The vastness of the diversity enables us to understand the seriousness of some of the world's greatest problems such as high level of poverty and

malnutrition, limited access to education, rising economic gap between increasingly urbanized city-dwellers and majority rural base masses, rampant corruption at every level of government machinery, rising level of fundamentalism and intolerance in society to name a few.

While social division on the line of caste hierarchy has been an issue thriving for centuries, social division on the lines of one's religious affiliation and racial denominations have been disturbing issues in India in the recent past. The new communal-centric wave polarized citizens of the same land for selfish political gains. Imagine a small group of minority of around 10 percent who occupy topmost position in the pyramidal caste-hierarchy controls and dominates every department of polity, administration and educational institutes for centuries in a democratic country such as India. Tribal chieftains and councils form the basis of political systems in most of the North-east India's tribes. The leaders occupy their positions almost on hereditary line. Many important decisions on allocations of resources and community services lie in the hands of these groups who sit on the top of the social and economic hierarchy.

High Points

Despite all the highlights of small and superior groups ruling the majority, there are stories that continue to inspire humanity, albeit few in number. Successful personalities in the fields of business, sports, entertainment, and scientific fields come from small yet determined communities. The examples of successful personalities among Jews in these fields are sensational. A small group of brilliant, honest and visionary leaders - the founding fathers - got together and painstakingly wrote the framework to govern their countries for generations to come at a time of chaos and instability in the two democracies of India and the United States.

Almost all the founding fathers had decent background and formed the elites of their respective countries at that time. Their elitism was translated to their foresightedness, dedication and patriotism. Elitism was directed to the stability and welfare of generations to come. Would there be a European Union or more appropriately a peaceful, prosperous and united Europe, as we see today, without the cooperation of the six founding members – four of them were smaller nations? Would there be a victory against Hitler's Nazism without the Allied Powers? Would the world be as peaceful and stable without the initiatives of a small group of stronger countries and their visionary leaders who were determined to establish a strong organization to maintain peace and stability in the world?

Low Points

Modern history has witnessed massacres and persecutions of millions of citizens using the most brutal form of state power in 1930s and early 1940s Germany and in Uganda from 1971-1985. Democratic nations such as India could not protect marginalized communities such as Sikhs and Muslims from religious ethnic cleansing authorized by small elites of politicians and officials in the government in 1984 and 2002 respectively. Today, a powerful dynasty rules an oil-rich kingdom as representative of people. Studies have shown that entry of a multi-national corporation such as Wal-Mart threatens businesses of many small-town retailers (Stone, 1997). Besides, the impact of this multi-national corporation on local culture and tradition is huge. These examples underline the cost of elite power in society, polity or an entity of public importance.

Attitudes on Elitism Need to be Changed

The basic problem of elitism in a developing country such as India is the people – the common people – themselves. This is so true for the subcontinent also. While the poor and lower most class of Indians are struggling for daily survival battles (of food, shelter, hunger, disease, basic health care, unemployment and so on),

majority of the middle class Indians fall victims of superstitions, lack of good governance, communal tensions, etc. The term 'elitism', in the minds of most of the Indians, is associated with a sense of superiority and often people, in majority, who could not be part of this elitist class, internalize this idea that everything associated with elites and elitism is good and something to be proud of, thereby undermining themselves. This false cultural baggage costs them their hope, rights, dignity, their freedom of expressions and often minimizes their ability to participate in decision-making processes. This mindset needs to be changed. However, this could be done only if there is also equal reciprocation from the elites – politicians, bureaucrats and business leaders. Else, there cannot be a genuine change.

Negative attitudes about elitism thrive in every corner of India. If a major party is run by a dynasty for decades, another major party is run by higher caste-men. There is casteism pervasive in the party hierarchy and this flows down all-pervasively into the larger Indian society. This explains why, although global economic boom in the past decade benefited India, it remains an emerging economy while being one of the poorest nations in the world in terms of socio-economic status of individual-citizens. Elitism in India can be manifested under the rubric of both caste and wealth. It is with this danger India has been existing and there is no proper time than today to change this mindset and move on towards a society where elitism is understood as a status accorded only to those who are willing, competent, dedicated and accountable to public needs and responsibilities irrespective of any ascriptive affiliation of individuals based on religion, region, caste, language, gender and so on. This will gradually evolve into a democratic society where marginalized communities could feel inclusiveness, participate in national decision-making processes and hope for a better future. And this is not so

ideal a thought in this digitalized 21st century.

Reform or Transform

At the global level, some of the pressing issues related to hunger, disease, threats to livelihood from global warming, corruption, education, inequality and others need a global solution. Ideally the United Nations was established to serve as a platform for all member-states – big or small – to come together and find solutions. Although this is partly true, the power structure in the UN Security Council tells a different story. Internal big power competitions and failure to come to a consensus led to inability to delivery its basic responsibility – to prevent war and maintain peace and stability in many instances. The United Nations power structure needs to be reformed according to the changing environment of the 21st century where social media has the ability to influence revolutions in a region of extreme importance and military superiority could not prevent the emergence of an unsymmetrical threat in the name ISIS or the Islamic State.

This needs political decision through consensus among the major powers of today on at least two levels. First, the old rule of the necessity to acquire military and economic power to resolve regional and world problems has its own limitations, and this is why the world needs to think of an alternative route. Analyzing the roots of the problems is as much an essential as finding for routes to solve the problems. Second, the transformation from traditional old rule of distancing away from a country's mismanagement of resources, thereby depriving its citizens the basic amenities of life in the name of sovereignty, to engagement through negotiations to stop such endeavor is the need of the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

Developed countries should cooperate with developing ones on various

issues such as the negotiations to mitigate climate change impacts to help them orient their development path to accommodate social justice for marginalized communities. While tension between nation-states and regional powers will be there as long as there is competition for power in international system, it should never distract the major powers from their responsibilities to make a world free from hunger, disease and disharmony. Small yet superior nations should align their interests in solving some of the pressing global non-traditional issues such as rising inequality, hunger, disease, limited access to education, crime against women and children and climate change impacts more than anything. That will be a huge alignment.

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