The success of India’s democracy has evoked much interest not the least because India is one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of per capita income and it is also the world’s largest liberal democracy. India is indeed rising for the aspiring as well as already privileged classes and the middle classes. On the other side, there are huge inequalities of income, wealth, consumption, access to education, health care and dignified employment. This raises the broader question: how and why such dramatic inequalities could persist in a democracy in which voters create pressure for improved outcomes.

The politics of identity such as caste, religion and ethnicity rather than class dominate the studies of India’s democracy. This preoccupation has overlooked the salience of class for an understanding of democratic politics in the wake of economic liberalization. We need to go beyond identity politics to understand the challenges confronting India. For this it is important to start by noting the dilemmas of democracy and development. In India, the logic of democracy and development are not asymmetric. Indeed, the two are functionally related with each process supporting the other. Nonetheless, there is a persistent gap between the outcomes that people expect and the state’s capacity to improve their well-being. In these circumstances democracy which has become a grounded reality in India has to find ways of reconciling economic growth with the well-being of the people.

The paper focuses on three broad areas - pluralism and inclusiveness, electoral politics and structural change, and growth and inequalities - to comprehend the changes in democratic politics and policy regime and the implications of this for the politics of equality. Politics played a central role in promoting pluralism and inclusiveness in the pre-liberalization period but this did not translate into material gains for the people; this challenge has become more daunting after economic liberalization which has principally benefited the elite and middle classes. More significantly, structural change under India’s economic model has failed to incorporate the lower classes which have set limits on the possibilities of substantive democracy and the future direction of Indian politics.

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