Politics of India:  Teaching Plan for Class on Indian Political Institutions

By Emily Clough

This Teaching Plan is for a Harvard undergraduate course entitled, *The Politics of India*. The course gives an overview of post-Independence political history in India and then delves into various themes of Indian politics, including topics like Indian political institutions, ethnic politics, regional politics, and caste and class politics. This Teaching Plan is for the discussion section during the week on Indian Political Institutions.

Learning Objectives

My key learning objectives for this week are for students to understand some basic facts, some general theory on institutions, and to synthesize the two to build a critical analysis, as follows:

1. **Basic facts:** Students should understand the basic facts about the structure and essential functions of India’s political institutions. They will get a lot of this from their readings, though we will also have time to answer questions about this at the beginning of class.
2. **General theory:** Students should grasp the idea of political institutions as “rules of the political game,” and they should develop curiosity about the question, *what are the political consequences of how we set up those institutions? How do we set up institutions (or rules of the game) to ensure fair and sustainable play in a democracy?* Over the course of the discussion, they should engage these questions critically.
3. **Synthesis and analysis:** Students should be able to synthesize their case knowledge and general theoretical ideas to analyze how the specific structure of Indian political institutions creates constraints and opportunities that in turn structure politics in India.

Lesson Plan

*Pre-Class Preparation:*

Prior to class, students do a series of readings about various Indian political institutions (including the Parliament, the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Supreme Court, the military, the President, etc).  They are instructed to take good notes about the function of each institution, the extent and limitations of its powers, and the rules that govern it. They are also instructed to pay attention to what the rules say about how these institutions must/can interact with each other.

*Foundational Discussion:*

We begin our class discussion with the question, “what are political institutions?” After an open-ended discussion, I introduce the idea that institutions are political rules of the game, reviewing political vs. sociological understandings of institutions and citing Levitsky and Helmke 2004, who distinguish between formal and informal institutions.

Using the “rules of the game” analogy, I then introduce the idea that it is difficult to design the rules of any game for *sustained play* – i.e. so that it's not possible for someone to gain an early advantage and take over the game permanently.  This leads us to the idea that political institutions are set up with checks and balances to keep the whole system working fairly, but that these rules inevitably contain loopholes and unevenness in how constrained different players are. After this set-up, we transition to the main active learning activity: mapping Indian political institutions.

*Activity: Mapping Indian Political Institutions*

* Separate the class into 4 groups of 3 or 4 people.  Make sure they've all brought their coursepacks (with readings) and have access to the Internet (as a back-up resource for fact-checking).
* Give each group a sheet of easel pad paper and several colors of sharpies.
* Ask each group to create a map of Indian political institutions and their “checks and balances” vis-à-vis each other.  Each "institution" (e.g. the Rajya Sabha, or Upper House) will be represented by an oval with its name inside, and the institutions will be connected by arrows, which represent specific ways in which one institution has a "check" (the power to constrain) on another institution.  For each arrow, the students must write the nature of the check (e.g. "President can dissolve the Lok Sabha and call elections if there's no majority").
* Give students 30 minutes to do this activity.  Walk around to each group and see if they're stuck.
* Once they've all drawn their maps, have them tape them each to the blackboard and take a seat

*Debrief and Discussion*

When the institution-mapping exercise is complete, the class sits together and examines all the maps side-by-side.  First, I ask them to note out loud whether some maps were missing things that other maps observed.  I also put up my version of the map for comparison, often noting that they've cleverly come up with something I missed.

Next, I ask them to examine the arrows on the diagrams, and to talk about what they notice in terms of which institutions seem to be more or less powerful, more or less constrained vis-à-vis other institutions.  They usually notice right away that there are very few arrows pointing toward the Supreme Court - and then I help them make the connection between that observation and the article we read, which talks about how the Supreme Court has become more and more "activist" and is claiming greater powers. We link that back to the idea that the way you design these institutions, or “rules of the game,” profoundly affects how actual politics plays out.

If there's time, sometimes I ask them what they would change about the map if they were setting up the rules of the game themselves, given what they read about how well the various institutions in India function. What reforms would they propose?

After class, I take digital photos of each map with my phone or camera and I email all of them to the class afterwards, so they have a record of their work.

Sample Institutional Maps





