

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN POLITICS OF INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

India has moved towards legally-based democratization. The mediating role political parties have played in bringing about this democratic transformation in a relatively peaceful manner, in a short span of time and under conditions considered not very conducive to democratic development, cannot be underestimated. They have assisted in the consolidation and expansion of democracy, popularized the notions of equality, social justice and freedom, and opened doors for inclusion, voice and empowerment of the weaker sections of society. Superficially political parties may appear to divide people, but parties also attenuate conflict, and show the way for people to come together. Thus, the party domain in India is full of intense struggle over contentious social and policy issues and also the space in which compromise and consensus are hammered out. What is required, therefore, is a critical and balanced assessment of parties that takes into account their strengths and achievements as well their weaknesses and failings in furthering democracy and governance.

Political parties in the Western democracies have declined as mass democratic parties in recent decades, especially in terms of membership, not to speak of the dissolution of communist parties in Europe and Australia. Parties in India, by contrast, continue to be vibrant and have millions of members. The self-reported membership of Indian parties ranges from about a million for the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to about 40 million for the Congress, and more than 100 million for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It is true that the average length of party membership or affiliation has become short, as party members and

supporters shift frequently from one party to the other, depending to a large extent on whether a party is in power or not. If we leave aside the strength and durability of party attachments, the fact remains that large number of people are willing to attach themselves to a party at a given point of time. Parties occupy a central place in the collective life and imagination. They are a constant feature in the television and electronic media, constituting, along with cinema, the popular culture in India. The huge numbers of ordinary people who gather at the meetings of political leaders, either out of curiosity to see the leader, liking for the party or out of an expectation of collective and individual welfare benefits, provides a testimony to the primacy of political parties to the people of India.

Political parties have played a crucial role in effecting social and political transformation, but the domain of parties has also undergone tremendous change. In the decades following Independence, the plural and federal character of India's polity quickly asserted itself. Within two decades of the first general elections, the dominance of the Congress party began to crack. A large number of new parties emerged, and many of them became ruling parties at the national or state level or both. In many states, the national parties have been marginalized or become adjuncts to their state-based rivals. This flux in the party domain and the proliferation of parties has given rise to coalition governments, which have become a regular feature of Indian politics since the 1990s. A large number of parties have shared power in these coalitions over the years. For instance the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, ruled at the Centre from 1999 to 2004 with about 30 different partners. The two governments formed by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA)

also drew on the support of more than 10 alliance partners. Thus the ability to secure the electoral support of regional and small parties has determined the fate of national parties in general elections over the past two decades. The BJP realized this in 1998, while the Congress took a few more years to accept the changed reality. In the 2014 Lok Sabha (lower house) elections, the BJP under Narendra Modi's leadership won an absolute majority. But it could do so only in alliance with several large and small parties in different states. In recognition of this situation, the party has formed a coalition government rather than a single-party government. Despite these alliances, the BJP has not been able to muster majority support in the Rajya Sabha (upper house), which has left the government unable to secure approval of major legislation. It is not certain whether the BJP alliance can reach majority-mark on its own by the time its term ends in 2019.

The rapid rise in the effective number of parties, changes in the relative strength of the national and regional parties and the political equations between them, the inability of many one party to control the parliament, and the presence of different parties and different patterns of party competition in states have impacted the course of India's democratization and governance. The rise of regional parties to power in states and their prominent role in the coalition governments at the Centre has brought state-level agendas and electoral prospects into play at the national level (see James Manor's article in this collection). In joining and partaking in coalitions, the main consideration for regional parties is whether or not such a step will augment their electoral prospects in their home states. The article by K.K. Kailash and Balveer Arora in this collection speaks of this scenario as a 'revolving door' with both spatial and temporal dimensions. These frequent shifts in coalition partners indicate that Indian parties are yet to devise norms for sharing power and forging durable alliances.

Democratic process has an inherent tendency not only to bring differences into the open and polarize people but also to foster moderation,

thereby persuading and pushing individuals and social groups to gradually move away from extreme positions on issues and policies. In the final analysis, the latter would prevail over the former. If that does not happen, democracy fails. Such a process can be tortuous and sometimes frustrating. Participation in elections, the need to build broad-based electoral support and the experience of exercising power in government tend to bring about moderation in political parties that begin their life with radical agenda either on the left or on the right. It is interesting that observers of Indian politics perceive this phenomenon in different ways: some criticize parties such as the CPI(M) and the BJP for obdurately sticking to their traditional ideology without being able to adapt to the changing world or showing reluctance to moderate. Others accuse the same parties of abandoning their ideology and making too many compromises, whereby they lose their special identity and become just like any other party. Divergent arguments about the convergence of parties and moderation process in India require systematic studies. Whether convergence or moderation is a reflection of the maturation of Indian democracy or something to be deplored requires consideration. How much policy and programmatic difference is required for voters to have a real choice in elections is another question.

Policy space for parties is not unidimensional. Therefore, we cannot judge parties with regard to their moderation, compromise or the abandonment of their traditional ideology, or conversely their maintenance of extreme positions, by looking at their policies on a single dimension. Moderation is also not something that we expect to happen in the short term. It is a long-term process, and it is difficult to detect the changes that keep happening in the radical parties at the subterranean level that take time to come into open. So those who perceive that parties are reluctant to moderate may have to look at the multiple dimensions of party policy and practice, rather than merely going by the protestations by those on the extremes or occasional rhetoric of the leaders. Some even deplore parties for becoming so indistinguishable in

terms of policies that the only choice left for people is one of choosing between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. But such a view does not seem to be entirely correct. Parties are divided on several issues and policies. We should keep in mind that voters make choices that have far-reaching implications for the nature of the state and government. Parties may not differ greatly in respect to macro-economic policy frameworks, but they tend to take divergent positions on social policy issues such as reservations or the need for a common civil code. They may also differ on the meaning of secularism and how best to realize it, or how to build a strong and united India. So, it is possible that parties may converge on certain policy dimensions yet differ on others. Sometimes small differences matter in making choices.

For instance, the convergence on economic policy since the introduction of the liberalization reforms is a striking pattern. The Congress party, which for a long time stood for building a socialistic pattern of society through promoting state-owned industries and centralized planning, ushered in the reforms. The socialist parties that had voiced opposition to these reforms continued them when they came to power in 1996 as the United Front. Communist parties too, which had taken a strident stand opposing these policies, participated in the United Front government or supported it from outside. The BJP, which had advocated *swadeshi* and a level playing field for Indian businesses, followed a similar set of reform policies when it came to power.

The BJP, which grew in strength on a plank of Hindu cultural nationalism, has relegated its demands for the construction of a temple in Ayodhya, a uniform civil code and abolition of the special status for the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir to the backburner. It has forged alliances with several other parties that have little or no interest in this agenda. Similarly, the two major communist parties have long abandoned their revolutionary programme of establishing a proletarian state through armed struggle and taken to the parliamentary path, as was demonstrated when Indrajit Gupta, the general secretary of the

Communist Party of India, joined the United Front government at the Centre in 1996 as Home Minister. The Communist Party India (Marxist), the more leftist of the two parties, ran governments in the states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, and played an active role in the formation of party alliances and coalition governments (see Hans Löfgren's article in this collection). It is ironic that the CPM-led government in West Bengal faced mass resistance to its industrial land acquisition policies, which culminated in its defeat in the 2011 Assembly election. In another article in this special issue, Hugo Gorringe analyses how the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) has transformed itself from a radical movement party that stayed away from elections into a party in the arena of electoral and coalition politics. It has not gained power itself, but it has gained wider recognition and access to patronage. This party provides us with another example of the moderation process and how radical parties get institutionalized.

But leaders of the ideologically oriented parties face serious dilemmas in their move toward moderation. In his article in this collection, Mitra argues that despite the BJP's electoral success the party's leadership remains ambivalent in its moderation. Given an appropriate mix of guaranteed space and the experience of office, he finds a move towards moderation by extremist parties is possible but not inevitable. Analyzing the Left Front government and the CPI(M) politics in West Bengal, Löfgren considers the dilemmas faced by this party due to its participation in parliamentary politics. It continued to advocate an alternative model of economic and political development while pursuing policies of moderation, constituting what Löfgren terms a 'deficit in imagination'. Ineffective articulation of its actual position as a social-democratic party led to the party's electoral defeat by an opposition that accused it of abandoning its pro-poor and proletarian ideology in favour of courting the capitalist class for economic development. Similarly, as Gorringe points out, there are people in and with the VCK who accuse the leadership of compromise, abandoning the party

ideology and principles, and turning the party into just like any other party.

Democratic politics has increased the representative character of parties over time. This happened in two ways. Many parties that are catchall types in their claim and practice have drawn more and more sections of society into the arena of politics, providing avenues for the elites from the socially and educationally backward classes to occupy leadership positions in party and government. Where this social balancing within a party did not keep pace with the pressures bubbling up all over the society, new parties emerged in the 1990s and beyond, drawing core leadership and electoral support principally from particular castes and other social groups. Leaders successfully worked with the available social cleavages to bring the Bahujan Samaj Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Samajwadi Party, Janata Dal (S), and others to power in key states. In some states small parties based on caste support in sub-regions grew in prominence and became relevant actors in politics. Some of these parties, while retaining the support of the people of a caste as its core, have been able to grow beyond either by successfully appealing for support from other castes and communities or building alliances with other parties. The journey of the Bahujan Samaj Party from bahujan samaj to sarvajan samaj is an example. One positive effect of the rise of the caste-based parties has been to empower the hitherto disadvantaged sections of the society, undermine the caste hierarchies and concomitant relations of domination, and foreground the notion of social justice. But where the support bases are ossified on the basis of caste, tribe and religion, they have led to the erection of walls of separation between different social groups. Thus the story of caste and identity based parties and politics is a complex one, containing both positive and negative aspects.

As the opposition parties in the late 1960s began to threaten the entrenched position of the Congress party, it resorted to a populist agenda. Indira Gandhi split the Congress on the ostensible plank of steering the country on a socialist path. Among other policy initiatives, banks were

nationalized to provide credit access to the poor and land ceilings were imposed to redistribute surplus land to the landless. She won the 1971 election on the slogan of banishing poverty from India. As people increasingly understood the importance and implications of their vote, all parties began to outbid each other in their search for voter support. Promises of collective and individual welfare benefits in the form of subsidized rice, house sites and housing, free or subsidized electricity, bank loans on easy terms, etc. became common. Welfare populism was an invention of the Indian parties to cope with democracy under the conditions of poverty, social backwardness and low economic growth amidst rising aspirations of the people.

Indian parties are weakly institutionalized, as is evident from the frequent splits and mergers and the formation of new ones at regular intervals. Furthermore, voters tend to shift from one party to the other, as can be seen in the high rates of electoral volatility. Consequently, politicians have increasingly turned to monetary incentives to supplement distributions from government programmes to maximize electoral support. Election campaigns and vote-gathering have become increasingly expensive, compelling political leaders to collect large donations for the party. To secure needed funds, political leaders have resorted to the extraction of 'rent' by way of making decisions that unduly favour business persons. Carolyn Elliott shows how the effort to gain funds both benefitted from and stimulated the centralization of party organizations in Andhra Pradesh, leading to a system she terms 'high clientelism'. Manor examines how chief ministers have used money in both legitimate and illicit ways to build or even purchase support from political notables and coalition partners. However, Manor observes that Indian parties are moving beyond clientelism to what he calls 'post-clientelist' initiatives as the political leaders realize the inadequacy of populism and clientelism to ensure re-election. Elliott documents a turn to programmatic politics in Andhra through 'saturation' schemes that provide benefits to all who are legally eligible, obviating any need for connections. She

raises, however, the question of whether these are sustainable, given their dependence on the electoral calculations of chief ministers.

Leaders and groups who break away from a parent party often proclaim policy differences as reasons for leaving the party or forming a new party. But it is difficult to disentangle such factors from motivations arising from power calculations and personality clashes. Most parties have become centered on one leader who exercises absolute control over the party. Only candidates who are trusted by the supreme leader can stand as candidates in elections. Leadership succession is often confined to the family members of supreme leaders, who see parties as personal fiefs to be bequeathed to their children. The rise of unbridled political corruption, concentration of power in a single leader, family control over parties, and the succession of sons or daughters to power have mutually reinforcing relationships, one contributing to the other. Political power at all levels has come to be seen as a source of amassing wealth for the political leaders and their coteries. This is one of the reasons for the fierce competition for securing party offices and party tickets in elections to the representative bodies. To secure party nomination, aspiring candidates are willing to pay huge sums, their followers come to fisticuffs in party meetings, and those who appear losing the race threaten with acts of self-immolation, hold dharnas in front of leaders' houses, and vandalize party offices. The language of everyday politics has become aggressive, harsh and vituperative. Leaders both inside the legislatures and outside abuse their rivals as if they would like to finish off the other.

Political corruption, family politics, a lack of internal democracy and concentration of power in parties and government are certainly not peculiar to Indian politics. But what distinguishes India is that such tendencies are nearly universal and integral to most parties. Democratic and stable parties based on clear policies with leadership that is not corrupt and see themselves as accountable are the exception. Leaders who break away from parent parties due to a lack of internal democracy and

autocratic styles of the party supremo, or who form new parties with the objective of fostering democratic culture soon after they come to power, turn into autocratic leaders with little democracy inside their parties. Those who denounce dynastic rule and found new parties have sought to perpetuate political power in their families once they ascend to power. Leaders who while in opposition level charges of horrendous political corruption, scandals and amassing wealth through foul means against ruling party leaders turn out to be equally corrupt, if not more, once they settle down in power. This does not augur well for a developing democracy, leading to negative attitudes toward politics and parties. How and why this has happened, how far these deplorable features are linked to social structural factors and the prevailing political culture, whether these are endemic to Indian politics or features of a passing phase require systematic and empirical studies. Prakash Sarangi's article in this collection makes an initial foray in this direction. Sarangi characterizes the transformation of Indian politics and political leadership in the latest phase as 'politics as business.'

That in turn raises the urgent need for political reform. What is required is not to enact more and more laws, but to strengthen the existing ones and ensure their enforcement. The Election Commission of India (EC), which is constitutionally entrusted with the task of conducting general elections, is not in a position to curb election campaign expenditures that are many times in excess of the stipulated levels. Parties today are so porous that elected representatives move freely from one party to another with great ease, despite the constitutional prohibition against legislators elected on one party ticket defecting to another. As Manjari Katju argues in this collection, due to the increase in the number of parties, the EC needs to play a more effective role in regulating party organization and internal structures, patterns of inter-party competition and the conduct of election campaigns. However, political parties, whether they be in power or in opposition, have a significant impact on the EC's capacity to play such a role in the

Indian political system. Parties may not give the EC the space to play these roles unless enough pressure is built from below, from the people and from civil society.

In the decades after independence fears were expressed that India may not long survive as a democracy given its high levels of poverty, illiteracy and diversity. In the 1970s and 1980s political scientists and observers expressed apprehension about the viability of democratically elected governments: they saw a huge gap between the demands made on the system by people who expect the government to take care of their welfare needs, and the capacity of the system to meet the groundswell of these demands and aspirations. In this view, the rise of expectations among the people and the populist policies of the parties made India ungovernable. With the introduction of liberalization reforms in the early 1990s the theme of governance occupied a prominent place in the political discourse, as well as academic research with an emphasis on the interlinkages between democracy, governance and political parties.

Of the multiple meanings of democracy we see two as most illuminating. In a minimalist sense democracy is a political arrangement to choose governments through periodic elections. Generally we call this liberal democracy. It involves rule-based government that administers and regulates relations between individuals according to law. At another level, democracy can be understood as an institutional arrangement that promises and promotes freedom, equality, justice and dignity of life. This has to happen through civic participation in public affairs on a continuous basis. It should ensure not only security for the individual, rule of law (treating everyone equal before the law) and rule-based government. It should also provide for the well-being of citizens, including education and basic needs, so that citizens can participate in public affairs in a meaningful way and lead a life worthy of a citizen. This is a definition espoused by social democrats. When we say that democracy is a political arrangement to choose governments, in the contemporary world this is tantamount to choosing

a ruling party or ruling alliance among the parties and alliances that compete for power. Since governments are formed by parties it is incumbent on parties to provide rule of law, and strive for the well-being of all citizens. Thus, parties are the agencies through which the objective of a democratically elected government, namely governance, is realized. It is crucial, therefore, that parties deliver governance with a view to promoting democracy and civic well-being.

Governance in its wider meaning is not merely about regulating markets, but also about enabling people to lead a life of dignity and satisfaction where they can perform their duties and work in an efficient and satisfactory manner; where deprivation and exclusion are mitigated; where trust in and legitimacy of governments are enhanced; and where leaders combine on a programmatic basis rather than to push their own interests or that of their cronies. Governance and democracy are not possible if leaders take a partisan view of the issues that confront society and the public, or if they treat their continuation in power as an end in itself or indulge in efforts to promote their own interests, such as amassing wealth at the expense of public well-being.

There would not seem to be any necessary connection between democratization and decline in rule-based governance. Indeed, many studies in India have found that less privileged groups are more engaged with politics, and are more dependent on rule-based governance than elites with personal connections. Post-clientelist initiatives to democratize service provision through the law and public policy instead of partisan politics support law-based governance. Governments that distort public policy to serve the needs of clientelist elites and disperse resources as patronage are rightfully accused of governing poorly. A challenge for India's party system is to institutionalize policymaking processes that are less governed by clientelist perspectives, i.e. to move beyond the realm of electoral strategy and into that of expected modes of governance.

This survey of Indian political parties contains lessons for the study of Indian politics, but also for the study of democratic politics more generally. India is the world's largest democracy, and Indians constitute about half of the people who live in what Freedom House defines as 'free' societies. This collection reveals how 'actually existing democracy' is practiced, which may give advocates of democracy reasons to despair. The contributors illustrate how growing political participation has been accompanied by a decline in intra-party democracy, and how identities and ideologies have sometimes dissuaded extremist parties from gravitating towards the centre of the political spectrum. But it is also true that India regularly holds elections, losers leave positions of power with the promise that they can try again in the next election, and more leaders from underprivileged groups have risen to power. It is understandable that observers of Indian politics may be disappointed with what they see, but their disappointment points out the great unrealized potential of democracy in India. This collection sheds light on the slow, but steady progress that Indian political parties have made toward realizing that potential of crafting democracy in India.

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