



EMERGENCE OF STATE POLITICS AS A FRONTIER DISCIPLINE

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ABSTRACT :

One of the significant development both in real politics and in the academic enterprise of making sense of politics has been the emergence of state politics as the centre of attention. Once upon a time, the study of Indian politics involved 'national' level politics alone. State politics was seen as a matter of detail and would be referred to only as an unavoidable appendage of all India politics. Delhi, Nehru and the national level political competition used to constitute the fact of Indian politics and the subject matter of the study of Indian politics. Two unstated assumptions informed this observation: one, that state politics was different from national politics and two, that state politics from the perspective of state was a matter of interesting detail, but just that. For an earlier generation of theorists of Indian politics, this was perhaps a natural reaction in view of the background of the national movement and the task of 'nation building' in which the national level political class was presumably engaged. In contrast, politics at the state level was about power, personal aggrandizement, parochial interests and their protection through lobbying, etc. also, in the 1950s and the 1960s one could understand a good deal of politics, by looking exclusively at the national level politics, national level leadership, policymaking and so on. Reference to states could be relegated to the margins of political analysis. Given the monotonous dominance of the Congress everywhere, state politics must have appeared a poor copy of national level politics. As political developments unfolded through the 1960s, the discipline of state politics emerged gradually. The inadequacy of analyses of Indian politics focusing exclusively on the national level became apparent as states actually started playing a crucial role in shaping the so called national level politics. Thus, studies on individual states started taking place.

KEY WORDS : *national politics, Congress System, democratic authority, party systems.*

INTRODUCTION :

In fact many studies of state politics were a response to the felt unintelligibility of national politics in the absence of state level analysis. The framework of national politics was supposed to be a given and whenever that given was not strictly followed, scholars turned to the study of state politics to find out what was wrong with Indian politics and how it was likely to restore the natural framework. As Indira Gandhi came to power and sought to redefine some aspects of the political game in India, observers were inclined to believe that it was the end of the given framework. This gave rise to the language of crises, deinstitutionalization and restoration observers to mean that it was the state of equilibrium necessary for democracy to survive in India.



The developments in the 1990s and scholarly response to them have contributed to the emergence of state politics as the frontier discipline essential for a nuanced understanding of Indian politics. However, this realization is yet to change the face of the discipline. Many of the studies of state politics rarely adopt a comparative perspective or ask questions that would lead to the theorization of Indian politics (Chhibber & Nooruddin 1999; Church 1984; Dreze and Sen 1998; Frankel and Rao 1989, 1990; Kothari 1970; Roy and Wallace 1999; Wallace and Roy 2003; Weiner 1968; Wood 1984). The usual practice is to review the politics of different states and stop there. Yet there are signs of a fresh beginning being made in the 1990s in the direction of a truly comparative study of state politics that could lead to a reappraisal of Indian politics. The growing literature includes three kinds of works. First, there are some studies that focus on a single state, but use it to develop a larger argument about Indian Politics. These include Jaffrelot (1993) on Madhya Pradesh, Narendra Subramanian (1990) on Tamil Nadu, Zoya Hasan (1998) on Uttar Pradesh, D.L. Sheth (2002) and Ghanshyam Shah (2002) on Gujarat, Peter de Souza (1999) on Goa and some articles in the Economic and Political Weekly collection on electoral politics. Second, there are some studies that offer direct comparison of politics in more than one state. Third, some analysts have attempted to offer an overview of the trends and patterns of party politics across a number of states (Jaffrelot 1993; Kumar 2000; Sridharan 2002; Yadav 1996, 1999). While Sridharan's detailed analysis ends by emphasizing the structural more than the social aspect of political competition, Jaffrelot's (1993) study focuses on the strategic alternatives available to the Congress after its decline had already begun. For instance, Sridharan argues that systemic properties explain most satisfactorily the changes in India's party system. A more ambitious and comprehensive framework for the study of state level party politics is offered by Harriss (1999). He pleads for differentiating state level party systems on the basis of the caste and class balance in the respective states. Our attempt here is to draw upon this growing literature and to contribute to it by looking back at the last 50 years of Indian politics, from the vantage point of the present movement in order to link the change in the party system and electoral politics to the developments in the field of state politics. While there is a considerable amount of literature on state level electoral politics, this has not produced any new thinking on the party system in India. As a matter of fact, analyses of changes in India's party system often stop at declaring the decline of the Congress and the arrival of the post Congress polity. That these developments were taking place at the state level and not just at the all India level is somewhat ignored. It may also be said that analyses of Indian politics do not take into consideration the issues of social change seriously. The party system and social change are seldom seen as interrelated.

Congress System Revisited

Any attempt to understand the changes in the party system in contemporary India must begin by asking one elementary question: what is that original point with reference to which we seek to measure the change? An answer to this enables us to take the next logical step and ask: what has changed with respect to the party system? Implicit in the current readings of Indian politics, there often exists a map of Indian politics, which existed in the era prior to the contemporary cataclysmic changes. This map or picture informs the contrast that is often drawn. The party system is now said to be moving from a one party dominance system to a multi party competition, from social cohesion to fragmentation, from a stable pattern to fluidity, from order to chaos as the principle of party competition. In order to rethink the dominant picture of the party system as it exists today, it is necessary to revisit that point of departure itself.

Since the 1960s a commonsense had evolved about the nature of party political competition through the first decade and a half of India's democratic experience. The most powerful formulation of this commonsense was, of course, captured by the term, 'congress system'. Developed in the mid 1960s, this formulation served to summarize India's competitive politics through the 1970s. It was a bold attempt to theorize the unique party system that India had developed that did not fit the straightjacket of the one party system or multi party competition. Kothari (1989) himself 'revisited' the idea of the Congress system in the mid-1970s and concluded that though some modification needed to be made to

the original formulation, the basic idea could be deployed for understanding the structure of party political competition in the 1970s and perhaps beyond.

The Congress system formulation contained the argument that in spite of an apparent one party dominance, inter party and intra party competition did take place. This competition often took place within the confines of a consensus because the Congress Party was occupying the 'centre'; opposition was allowed both within the margins of this centre, inside the Congress Party, and outside it. Apart from the structural features, Kothari's formulation involved an ideological component. The Congress system was a system of legitimacy. The issue was establishment of a democratic authority. This was achieved in India on the basis of a historical consensus that was converted by the party system into present consensus. This was possible because the congress system encompassed all major sections and interests of society. Kothari believed that the Congress system combined the efforts to gain legitimacy and the efforts towards social transformation. The system did so by inducting, perhaps neutralizing, all potential sources of disaffection. The Congress Party's democratic back ground and the policies adopted by the Congress government were instrumental in achieving this objective. This model emphasized the role of the government in social change. Also, in Kothari's initial formulation, Nehru's leadership played a very important part in shaping this aspect of the congress system.

The mid-1970s witnessed the initial challenge to the Congress system. In the 1980s the Congress Party managed to return to power, though the Congress system was considerably weakened. Cataclysmic events since the late 1980s changed both the discourse and the framework of Indian politics. Yet, it is worth noting that analyses of these changes were often anchored to the framework of the Congress system. This point to the obvious strength of the idea of the Congress system argument. Instead of trying to fit India into the received images or models of party competition from the West, Kothari's formulation sought to capture the specificity of Indian politics. It recognized the fact of one party dominance without accepting the image of the authoritarian nature of politics associated with it. Refuting the implication that there was a closure in this form of political competition, the formulation drew attention to the oppositional role of the the factions within the Congress, a feature that gave a competitive character to both inter and intra party politics.

These merits and strengths of the Congress system argument, or at least its popular versions, may have overlooked or underemphasized some aspects of the party system as it prevailed through the 1960s. In revisiting the Congress system, we need to have a quick look at these aspects. First of all, the formulation drew our attention away from the simple fact that anything between a quarter to a half of India was never conversed by the Congress system. West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab are examples of states where the Congress system met with opposition early on or simply did not dominate. Besides, states like Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Assam were states where the Congress continued in power but was far from exercising dominance. Kothari himself points out that in the ex princely states the Congress system was weak. But viewed in a totality, these exceptions are just too many and too significant to ignore. The only conclusion we can draw from these exceptions is that the Congress system was perhaps a description of the party system existing at the national level more than the description of Indian party system.

Second, in Kothari's formulation, the Congress system was presented as a natural outcome of an unequal and de centered society where a political centre was instituted. This invited the reader to think that they system had greater enduring capacity than it really did. Thanks to this formulation, the Congress ystem appeared as a regular and long term phenomenon whose absence or erosion required explanation. In retrospect, it appears that Kothari may have read too much into what was a temporary political form of the first phase of competitive political mobilization. At a time when mobilization was rather limited, political competition could be conducted only in a circumscribed manner. In the Indian context, the existence of Congress as a movement, as a party, and as an instrument of government, combined with a towering and popular leader produced a particular structure of competition. There was nothing in this situation that ensured the continuation of the Congress system once the terms of popular mobilization changed.

Third, the Congress system argument underline the 'catch-all' and consensual nature of politics. This description was factually correct. However, it does not probe the inner logic of this consensus. Nor does the argument take notice of the play of dominant interests. The 'catch-all' character and the facade of consensus helped the Congress system in two respects. In the first place, the Congress system sought to make compromises with upper castes and allowed their domination in the political realm. A consensus about procedural democracy coupled with welfare oriented developmentalism helped in de-emphasizing the claims of the lower castes. On the other hand, the catch all character of the Congress Party won elections for it, without forcing any change in its policies or leadership pattern. The Congress Party was supported by the masses, which belonged to various social backgrounds. This gave the party the famous tag of a 'catch-all' party. At the same time, the party and the Congress system worked to keep the Dalits, advises, peasants and workers, at a distance for positions of power. The Congress system was based on a trade off: the Congress party would symbolically incorporate the various social sections, but the party's upper class upper caste leadership should be recognized as legitimate and as representative of the masses. In other words, the Congress system was not really as open as its theorists thought it was: it was as much about exclusion as it was about inclusion. Under the cloak of consensus, a distance was always maintained between the supporters and the beneficiaries of the Congress system. Perhaps, this was possible because, as Kothari himself points out, the political class as a whole came from a common social background and was not sensitive to these sociological dimensions of democracy. This consensual nature of the political elite and their common perception of the nation and development were the core of the consensus, rather than any socially agreed vision or consensus in the true sense of the term.

There is also a tendency in Kothari's argument to underplay the plebiscitary nature of politics right from the beginning of India's democratic politics in the post independence period. With hindsight, we can say that Kothari may have overstated the system dimension of party competition. The Congress, in spite of being a well knit organization, depended quite happily on the charisma of Nehru for winning election. It was a combination of state level organization and Nehru's plebiscitary leadership that ensured the dominance of the Congress. The organization alone could not have brought the success which the Congress enjoyed for a long time. In fact, Indian politics in general and the Congress movement in particular, always had this plebiscitary character even in the pre independence period. In the post independence period, successive elections were turned into plebiscites. Just as the organizational dimension helped the Congress marginalize the opposition parties, the plebiscitary leadership style ensured that issues would be framed in a fuzzy manner, that the focus would be more on personal charisma than on concrete programmes or performances. As we know, this characteristic continued and played an important part in politics in the 1970s.

This critique of the Congress system does not render the formulation obsolete. In fact, the label the Congress system needs to be retained since it reminds us of the principal character of Indian politics in a particular era. Our purpose in developing this critique is two fold. First, we wish to underline the point that the Congress system was necessarily a short term response to the early phase of democratic mobilization following the opening up of the floodgates of universal franchise. This puts in perspective the expressed nostalgia for the return of the Congress system: this no stagehands a desire to go back to a stage of democracy when the masses were not politicized, when politics was still the game of the few. Second, the critique serves to remind us that the consensus of the Congress system was a hegemonic construct: it did allow for incubation of democratic politics and for a safe experiment with social change, yet it could not have been the political form for a full fledged engagement of competitive politics with social transformation. Very early in its long life, the Congress system had become a constraint on the possibility of transformative politics.

A model for Party System

It is very common to invoke the term 'party system' in any discussion of Indian politics. But more often than not a discussion of the party system tends to be a loose and generalized way of discussing shared attributes of parties in a given political system. Or else, it is a simple numeric

description of the number of relevant parties in a given polity: one party systems, two party or bipolar systems and multi party systems. Both these prevalent ways of discussing the party system lose sight of the basic point behind the idea of a party system: that it is a 'system' that conditions and constrains all the parties that operate within it, that it is more than the sum of the parts. Therefore, we need to distinguish between changing fortunes of parties and changes in the party system. For instance, what we are looking for in this chapter is not so much an explanation for why the Congress came to lose power, but how and why it found itself facing a radically different pattern of political competition, and its implication of the existing parties and for popular mobilizations. Thus, the basic idea is to grasp that the configuration in which parties find themselves locked happens to be an independent factor that constrains what individual parties and voters can do. In this sense, this configuration provides a framework within which party competition and popular mobilization take place. The nature and structure of the competition determine how open or closed a party system is in processing societal claims, in allowing new entrants, in admitting unattended issues, etc.

At an epistemic plane, the conventional thinking about party systems tends to be passive in that it is assumed that there is a correct classification of the party system that cuts across time and space. In that understanding the task of a political analyst is to identify the right classification and place the polity under examination in the appropriate slot in a given typology. Epistemic commonsense and political wisdom requires us to move away from such a passive stance vis-à-vis the received classifications. For classifications and typologies are not out there these are analytical constructs meant to put cognitive order on the material we seek to examine. Typologies are thus, not right or wrong they are more or less helpful depending on how well they allow us to order the experience that we seek to categorize and in answering the questions that led us to this typology. On this understanding, the exercise of classification is dependent on our vantage point, our location, and our objectives. Therefore, this attempt to understand the role of the party system in democratic politics of social transformation cannot take up and simply deploy the received typologies of party system. We must interrogate the received classifications from our vantage point: the experience of competitive politics in India in the second half of the 20th century and the search for democratic politics for social transformation.

Once we foreground these concerns, it is clear that there has been some thing of a regress in thinking about the specificity of the party system in India after the decline of the Congress. Notwithstanding the limitations in the theorization of the Congress system, no one can deny that a lot of thought went into the understanding of the party system that operated in the first phase of democratic politics in India. The uniqueness of the political situation forced Indian political scientists to look beyond mechanical replication of the party system models received from the West. The decline of the Congress has removed that constraint and has produced a surface resemblance between the party system in India and its counterparts all over the world. This has led to a tendency to slip into the traditional classifications of the party system produced by old style comparative politics.

CONCLUSION

Our attempt here is to draw upon this growing literature and to contribute to it by looking back at the last 50 years of Indian politics, from the vantage point of the present movement in order to link the change in the party system and electoral politics to the developments in the field of states politics.

The party system is now said to be moving from a one party dominance system to a multi party competition, from social cohesion to fragmentation, from a stable pattern to fluidity, from order to chaos as the principle of party competition.

The only conclusion we can draw from these exceptions is that the Congress system was perhaps a description of the party system existing at the national level more than the description of Indian party system.

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