

Nature of Party System and Mushrooming Regional Parties in India

Prof. H. N. Kerur

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Municipal Arts College, Laxmeshwar, Gadag, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the role regional parties in Indian politics. Regional parties are political parties active in one or more of India's 28 states and union territories. The Indian National Congress was the natural and inevitable outcome of a national awakening. The paper highlights the rise of regional parties, basically altered electoral politics in India. The paper explores the mechanism to support or control the government, make policies, validate or contest them. Congress party develops as a big umbrella under which all communities and interests and ideologies sought and got a place.

Key words: political, party, politics, democracy, regional, system, congress and national

INTRODUCTION

The present age is an age of democracy and in it all the citizens have the right to express their views and criticize the functioning of the government. The individual cannot himself make the proper use of these rights and that is why the political parties saw their dawn. In the absence of political parties our political life will be incomplete. They are indispensable and are vital links between the people and the representative machinery of government. During times of coalitions, regional parties provide as a restrained force upon exclusionary national parties. Political parties in India that functions within a certain region or state.

People hold different opinions and different views but many agree on certain issues. Those who hold identical views are bound to come closer to one another. When people holding identical views organize themselves, they form a political party. "Party systems can be distinguished by the degree of political fragmentation, proportionality of seats-to-votes ratio and barriers to entry to the political competition" (Golosov, Grigorii 2010:192) A political party is a voluntary association of those people who hold similar views on certain issues and who have organized themselves to capture the seat of power and run government machinery through constitutional means to bring about all-round and wholesome welfare of the people and to promote national interests. People's support for government policies is badly needed and this support is mobilised by a political party. Similarly people require a mouth-piece to convey their feelings, doubts, fears and aspirations to the government and this function is performed by a political party.

According to MacIver, "A political party is an association organized in support of some principle or policy which by constitutional means it endeavours to make the determinant of the government". Burke thinks, "Political party is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principle in which they all agree". Gettle opines, "A political party consists of a group of citizens more or less organized who act as a political unit and who by the use of their voting power aim to control the government and carry out their policies." According to Gilchrist, "A political party may be defined as an organized group of citizens who profess to share the same political views and who by acting as a political unit try to control the government." Laski views it as an organization that seeks to determine the economic constitution of the state. Thus we see a political party embraces so many activities. Its role does undergo a change with the change in political conditions. In dictatorship a political party is formed to educate public politically to circumscribe the powers of the dictator. In democracy it is formed to capture the seat of power. "Political parties are collective entities and activities that organize competitions for political offices" (Aldrich, John 1995) Many a time a political party is formed to highlight regional and local issues and to capture power is not its primary role. Still more a political party sees its dawn to mobilize the support of the people for a particular ideology.

Party system in India came into being along with the struggle for freedom. In the West social and economic issues worked as the seeds for the growth of the sapling of a party and as such political ambition played a minor role. In India a political party came into being for political reasons; it was formed against the colonial subjugation. The Indian National Congress symbolising the aspirations of the people in that particular political atmosphere was on the forefront. After independence this nationalistic party attracted people from all walks of life and even those elements embraced it which kept themselves away from the nationalist movement. Thus after independence the Congress established itself the most powerful and influential political party of India. The dominance established by the Congress was a natural phenomenon and it required no special efforts on the part of the leaders. It enjoyed trust and faith of the people. It will not be hyperbolic to say that the Congress was the only party dominating the political scene at that time. "In recent decades, Indian politics has become a dynastic affair. Possible reasons for this could be the party stability, absence of party organisations, independent civil society associations that mobilise support for the parties and centralised financing of elections" (Chhibber Pradeep 2013:195)

In a country of a big size like India one-party dominance was not to continue for a longer period. After the achievement of the political mission many new factors surfaced. Social and economic issues started dominating the scene and leaders started thinking about the ways to solve socio-economic problems. All men can't think alike. Different opinions and different suggestions to overpower the crisis give rise to different groups. In spite of the Congress domination in 1960s new political groups cropped up. The Congress started losing its hold as the single party of the Indian bourgeoisie and new political groups emerged. Still it seemed that there was no competition for the Congress party but 1967 election gave a rude shock to this myth. The Congress failed to secure majority in eight states and its popularity at the national level also received a drubbing as its majority was reduced to a narrow margin of fifty four percent. The voters found themselves confused and it was natural because of the formative period of various parties. A clear cut polarization of political forces could not materialize and the Congress could not be challenged by any rival political party as there was no viable alternative to the Congress. India saw the amalgamation of different ideologies and no historical force was strong enough to stop this coalition. It became quite clear that the days of one-party rule were numbered.

Change from near one-party existence to multi-party entity was inevitable and no force could check its advent. Big business houses to safeguard their interests plunged into the political arena indirectly. They sided with forces opposing the Congress party. West Bengal saw the emergence of Communist's dominance but instability in the states once again changed the mood of the general public and the Congress came out one piece solid though it had not that backing of the yesteryears. In reality people were taken in by the populist slogans and once again gave the old guard a chance to bring about economic changes. Highly frustrated Opposition could not muster enough support of the public. Slogans remained slogans and one-party dictatorial rule paved the way for a loose coalition and the Janata Party surfaced almost overnight, an amalgamation of diverse and disparate elements. Seeing the emergence of the Janata Party many political thinkers opined that India too would be having a two-party system like the U.S.A. With much fanfare the rule of the Janata Party was established. People were fed up with dictatorial measures adopted by the Congress and from the Janata Party they had high expectations. It was not a common ideology but a common foe that had brought different factions together. Internal bickerings and factionalism persisted in the Janata Party and the open fight and diverse interests of the constituents tarnished the image of the Janata Party and people got disillusioned.

Disintegration of the coalition was on the card. Internal bickerings did not give its leaders enough time to alleviate pitiable economic conditions prevailing at that time. Moreover, sudden acquisition of power the leaders of the Janata Party could not digest. Promises made they failed to fulfil. Within two years the people realised their mistake and the experiment to bring about a change failed miserably. And inevitable happened; the people rejected the Janata Party in the 1980 mid-term polls. One party domination once again established itself. Congress (I) came to power. Mrs. Indira Gandhi emerged as the undisputed leader after the January 1978 split of the Congress party. She returned to power and here people saw a strange phenomenon, the leader became more important than the party. Popularity of the Congress (I) was sliding downwards. The party was defeated in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and it lost many by- elections. Electorate wanted a change. After the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi the Congress party succeeded in winning the trust of the people, it was partially because of the sympathy wave also. The party projected itself as the only saviour of the people. Then came Rajiv Gandhi. He was seen as a crusader to uphold political and moral standards. People who were dissatisfied with the system and those who made use of the system for their interests rallied behind Rajiv Gandhi. The Congress came to power with thumping majority. One-party dominance was again restored. In the mean time BJP surfaced as a formidable challenge. But there was no interaction between the party in power and the Opposition. The ruling party thought that the Opposition was a nuisance only. The Opposition was after chances to expose the leaders of the ruling party. National interests were relegated to the second place.

Caste and communal divisions, cultural diversity, rural-urban disparities, traditional and modern thinking, linguistic differences were hurdles in the way of the formation of a united front. Even different leaders having the same ideologies could not persuade their respective parties to shake hands and form a united front. "In many countries, the notion of a political party is defined in law, and governments may specify requirements for an organization to legally qualify as a political party" (Avnon, Dan 2007:300)

Internal dissensions in each and every party persisted. The parties organized around personalities could not offer policies and programmes. Commitment to ideologies was conspicuous by its absence. Lack of ideological base always prevents any ideological polarization. When social and economic disparities increase and development crawls revolutionary movements emerge. Ideologies come closer and alliances are made. "During the wave of decolonization in the mid-20th century, many newly sovereign countries outside of Europe and North America developed party systems that often emerged from their movements for independence" (Angrist, Michele Penner 2006: 54)

The national identity which dominated the scene at the time of freedom struggle and forged a sentimental unity got disfigured when regional casteist identities surfaced. For political freedom people forget their regional, lingual and religious identities. The Congress struck the iron when it was hot and through countrywide membership campaign became a national political party. Political freedom achieved, people started thinking about their regions. To develop their regions socially, economically and politically they started organizing parties. Several regional parties appeared on the scene on the basis of caste or region.

The growth of regional parties is very complex. Firstly, people got disillusioned with the deeds of the national parties. Whenever the regional leaders found the national parties ignoring their interest new parties are formed. Regional dissatisfaction and neglect, discontentment and anger found natural outlets in regional parties. The Akali Dal is the result of a persistent neglect by the party in power at the Centre. BSP was formed because it found the government siding with the upper class. AGP emerged when its leaders found the Centre neglecting their region. You can't please all, all the time. In diverse India problems differ from region to region and it is beyond the capacity of the Central government to satisfy the needs of all the regions, so dissatisfaction is bound to arise and this dissatisfaction gives a golden opportunity to the regional leaders to goad people to support them in the formation of regional parties to solve their express problems and to meet their aspirations; and this step distances the masses from the power at the Centre. DMK, Shiv Sena, Mizo National Front, Tripura Upjatiya Juva Samiti (TUJS) and BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) are based on castes and Assam, Gana Parishad (AGP), Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), Kerala Congress, Manipur Peoples Party (MPP), Nagaland People Council (NPC) and Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) are the outcome of regional aspirations. Unfortunately all the parties were more concerned at the electoral gains and capture the seat of power.

The Congress shook hands with the Muslim League in Kerala. Strange coupling occurred and foes became bed-fellows. Regionalism could not be diluted and it grew unchecked and secessionism was its culmination. Kashmir and Punjab were completely coloured in the gaudy hues of regionalism.

Regional parties are also formed when ego of leaders get hurt. Infighting in the DMK resulted into the formation of AIADMK headed by Ramachandran. Karunanidhi expelled Ramachandran from the DMK as some differences had cropped between the two. Two days after the expulsion Ramachandran formed his own party-AIADMK. In Kerala also an altercation between the C.M. Mr. A.K. Antony and K. Karunakaran became the cause of the formation of a new regional party, Congress Indira. Similarly, who can forget the demand of a separate Sikh Suba? In Haryana also INLD, a regional party, was formed. In 1983 the Telgu Desam Party (TDP) was organized because interference by the Centre in the day-to-day administration of Andhra Pradesh irked local Congress leaders and the common masses. A peculiar phenomenon is to be noticed. Wherever the Congress lost ground and the local leaders and people in general got alienated from the Congress a vacuum occurred and regional parties filled this vacuum and provided leadership to the people. Main factors that contributed to the formation of regional parties can be counted as under:

The failure of national parties to solve regional problems alienated the local masses and local leaders promised to solve the problem and them readily got support of the people when they formed regional parties. Too much interference by the Centre in the day-to-day administration of the states where the local units of the ruling party at the Centre were in saddle angered the local leaders and they formed their own regional parties to capture the power. When ego of some prominent regional leaders was hurt they immediately organized their own parties. The tendency of centralization on the part of the Centre reduced the local leaders to pigmies and disgruntled elements formed a new party to register its dissatisfaction and anger.

CONCLUSION

Centre's policies to please the so called minorities also gave impetus to the formation of regional parties. In many states foreigners settled down and the Centre failed to send these people back to their countries because these foreigners were vote banks of the Centre. This created ill will and local leaders formed their own parties to end this problem. Still more the leaders who could not be accommodated in the Cabinet defected from the ruling party and formed their own new parties. Thus we see regional parties came into being, more or less, for gaining power and the issues which formed the basis of these regional parties were relegated to the second place. Centre should not boss over the states. Both the Centre and the states should be strong to guarantee national unity. India being diverse will have to tolerate regional parties

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