

Journal of Peace Studies, Volume 2, Issue 8, January-February, 1995

Indian Politics in Transition: From Dominance to Chaos

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Published by Deep & Deep, New Delhi, Price: Rs. 350.00

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Indian democracy and democratic process – elections continue to be an enigma. British colonial masters and many among the Indians had doubted the ability of millions of illiterate and hungry masses to behave judiciously. Some had predicted its demise while others had described that it would lead to anarchy and chaos. The above conclusive remarks and predictions were based on growing conflict in society on various issues thrown upon by the democratic paradigm. But conflict is inevitable in a society, which is passing through transition, from a gigantic tradition to post-modernity. Upheavals are natural whenever a strong voice is raised by exploited ones to assert their rights. Such conscious people (literate or illiterate) have ability and clear understanding in establishing a balance between national, group and individual interests – both short and long-term. At times it goes against the demand of stability and desire for equality resulting into varies electoral behaviours and patterns.

Elections are at the heart of the very idea of democracy. Every form or shade of democracy upholds its inevitable necessity with value added sanctity. Such an electoral exercise is periodically sought for because it provides legitimacy to the managers of the state. Therefore, elections are the periods of most intense interface between state and society. Political parties mediate this crucial interaction. Hence, to examine the nature of party system is important to understand a polity.

The book under review analyses the changing patterns of the party system in India since the first general elections in 1952 to the state elections in 1993. The year 1967 was a landmark when the Congress monolith crumbled and about eight states had non-Congress governments for both longer and shorter periods. This heralded an era of localisation/regionalisation of Indian politics. Now that the local issue based politics has solidified there is some impending threat of instability.

The title of the book emphasises Transition which is often tumultuous, baffling and even painful. Moreover, it is erratic and unpredictable, defying theorisation by political pandits in too complex and plural a society like India. The reasons are many, as the author has pains-takingly enumerated – personality cult, dynastic rule, socio-economic upheavals, centralisation, deinstitutionalisation, wave elections, defections, factionalism, caste, religion, money, muscle and media power etc. All this is said to have resulted in a chaotic scenario emerging from the decline of the multi-party/coalition system. Therefore, the author has rightly suggested evolving constitutional provisions for a stable multi-party coalition government even though instability is inherent there. However, one has reasons to contest the conclusion that Indian party system has moved from one party dominance to chaos because this so-called chaos is said to have emerged after the BJP's electoral debacle in 1993 state elections and its subsequent introspection. May be, pro-Hindutva intelligentsia and simplistic media projected the BJP as an alternative to the Congress as the author

also believed in. Therefore, the rising crescendo of the BJP in UP is explained in terms of the BJP vs all; an important turn from the Congress vs all.

This smacks of partisan observation and the author goes to the extent of saying that, “most of the aberrations in Indian politics, even since independence, owe themselves to the perpetual divisions amongst the Hindus as reflected in the fractured votes... Whether it is Kashmir or Punjab or Assam, these are symptoms of the deep malady basically caused by Hindu disunity.” Following the Hindutva paradigm, rectification is sought through the BJP’s Hindu mobilisation by attacking the citadels of pseudo-secularism; more especially that of the Congress. It is pertinent to dispute these self-saluting explanations and righteous claims. No problem in India is uni-dimensional and therefore the answer can also not be single. The so-called appeasement and the great betrayal theories are aberrations and opportunism practised, if at all, by every political party in one or the other way and therefore political crisis prevails in India. Nevertheless, in a plural society like ours, no political party can think of long-term substantial electoral gains, notwithstanding momentary waves, which is single-issue based because the cultural ethos of India never accepted any form of extremism – ideological or otherwise. Moreover, politics is not a simple game of mere numbers; it is something more complex. Only visionaries can comprehend this complexity. Myopic politicians fall in the trap of numerical naivete to ruin themselves and their societies. Examples are many – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Lebanon etc. In India too, both Mandal and Mandir protagonists have had to suffer almost equally. Their numerology could not succeed to capture power at the Centre and even in states their fate is not better than others.

Political instability is not only an Indian phenomenon today. People have become more “informed and critical”; thanks to the information revolution. They are becoming more concerned about the comparative benefits and needs of life. They expect the rulers to fulfil their rosy electoral commitments irrespective of caste, creed and community. Voters have begun to reject the wayward politicians in power. In a sense, it is a positive sign to invoke the Gandhian perception of *Power for service* as the author also suggests to improve the system as a whole. This is too difficult a task because we are inured to the holier than thou approach wherein everyone shifts responsibility and blame on others. The author laments the chaos and conundrum that the Indian political system has become due to decline in political culture and morality. But this decline owes to some extent to a lack of objectivity, and excessive bias on the part of intellectuals too. Their partisan views, deliberate or otherwise, are equally harmful. Such temptations must be subdued. Objectivity is the first precondition for a researcher; otherwise she/he tends to be a pamphleteer and propagandist. The latter ones are as harmful as any unscrupulous politician.

Despite these limitations, the book is readable for one and all having keen interest in Indian politics. It has good documentation survey and bibliography of a recent literature and a useful index.

State elections of 1995 offer a clear pattern/trend to dethrone those in power as all political parties indulge in almost similar activities with a difference of degree. There is growing consciousness among the masses. They cannot be taken for granted for long. Thus, Indian politics has moved from dominant party system to demanding public system.

