

Decline of a Centralizing State Changing Nature of Political Power in India

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India adopted a democratic parliamentary system of government with universal adult franchise at a time when there was around 35% literacy rate with more than 50% people living below the poverty line. Much of the effort since then has been to empower the people to exercise their franchise effectively – raising literacy rates and reducing poverty levels. The discourse on democracy also centered round the core western liberal concepts of individual rights, freedom and equal opportunity. It is in making evaluations against these ideals that we often hear desperate accounts of how democracy is not functioning well in the Indian context. The decline in the quality of public life and state's incapacity to meet the growing demands of the people is attributed to the pathology of the democratic political system. Indeed, India faces a paradox. There is a rise in social conflicts, the economy has been passing through difficult phases and democratic institutions are continuously under strain in trying to stem the tide of protest and violence in the country.

Democracy, on the other hand, seems to have deepened and widened its reach. The proportion of socially and economically deprived people coming to vote their own choice has risen in recent years. If there is so much turbulence at the level of electoral outcomes, one of the fundamental reasons for it is that the participatory base of electoral democracy has expanded since the 1990s. The odds that a socially and an economically deprived person will vote are much higher today than when the country started on its path of democratic governance. (see for elaboration Yadav, 1999)

This kind of democratic experience has severely strained the system of governance particularly after the democratic participatory upsurge in the last two decades. The difficulties were compounded by the pattern of economic development that took place in the country. While economic growth and removal of poverty continued to dominate the development discourse, the actual outcome of policies was far from the ideals set. Population growth has continued to hover around 2-2.5% per year; the rate of per capita income growth has been a little less than the population growth, thus having not too substantial impact on poverty levels. Illiteracy rates have come down but a little less than

half the population still is unable to read and write. There has been economic development but it is highly skewed. Some regions and states have done much better while a few states with large populations have lagged behind considerably. The dilemma of increased political participation within a system of restrictive economic benefits is the major challenge that the policy maker's face as the country enters the second millennium.

The Congress Party and Its Decline

For a long time the Congress party served as an umbrella party, ironing conflicts and creating consensus on issues that threatened to be divisive otherwise. This was the party that was in the forefront of the national movement for independence and under the leadership of Nehru formed the government after independence. Among all the parties, this party has towered over all others and has remained in power except for brief periods from 1947 to 1995. It has been reduced to a minority in opposition in the last few years.

The process of consensus building was the most important characteristic of the party. Nehru's personal domination of the party and the government did not overly constrain inner party democracy. Internal democracy was maintained at least for two reasons. First, Nehru took his role of implanting parliamentary and democratic institutions on to the India soil rather seriously. Secondly, his colleagues-both in government and party-were those with whom he had personal relationships from the days of the freedom struggle when they were also companions in British jails. They could advise him candidly without threatening his leadership. Thus dissent was expressed openly and accepted in that spirit. The organizational structure of the party was also such that it allowed for elections at every level from local base upwards and parliamentary and organizational wings working together.

This structure helped in creating conciliatory machinery within the party at various levels, which prevented local conflicts from becoming issues of national moment. As Manor (1988) points out, the management of resources – at which many in the Congress excelled – was essential to achieve reconciliation, to mediate in factional disputes, and to influence political decisions at state and district levels. Manor further described the Congress party as a giant system of 'transactional linkages, a mechanism for the distribution of spoils in return for political support and organizational loyalty. The main integrating ideas were opportunism, self-aggrandizement, the impulse to enter patron-client relationships, and to forge deals. As a consequence the role of the party in policy-making gradually diminished while its place as an integrating mechanism in society came to be strengthened.

During the 1960s observers attributed much of the success of the Congress party to its ability to forge widespread patronage networks which provided critical linkage between local demands and central responses (Weiner, 1967; Kothari, 1975). These naturally helped to solve a variety of power conflicts. Gradually, however, these links were destroyed. No elections were held within the party after 1972 as Mrs. Gandhi started to appoint persons to both governmental and organizational positions for personal loyalty and not for their ability to articulate grass-roots demands. These appointees did not have the capacity to influence local behaviour and could not mediate between social and political conflicts. As a result, Congress lost its pre-eminent role in the political system. Rajiv Gandhi referred to its decline when he called it a party of brokers of power and influence that had converted a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy.

The party of 1970s onward unlike its previous incarnation- became a centralized organization owing loyalty to single leader. It lost touch with real issues and was interested in government only so long as the flow of patronage continued. Loyalty to a leader was also based on the ability to ensure this flow. The result was that it fell prey to internal bickering and factional fights that were more personal than policy related. People oriented parties that were regional in nature and that responded to sectarian interests multiplied and have become major partners of coalition governments formed in 1989 and after 1996. Congress party itself has got reduced to one among many in contrast to the hegemonic position it occupied in the political system earlier.

The Congress Party's unquestioned dominance in the 1950s and 1960s rested in part on the prestige it retained from its role in India's independence struggle, and in part on an intricate patronage network that stretched from Delhi to India's tens of thousands of villages. (Kohli, 1996:118) The old patronage system weakened due to various reasons. An important reason was the decline of the Party organization. The entire structure that linked the villages with the highest decision making bodies lost its salience as no democratic elections were held and all powers were usurped by the central leadership. The party began to depend on a charismatic leader who relied on a group that was loyal to her. The institution of a 'high command' emerged which was supposed to take all decisions and enforce them on the basis of loyalty among its followers. This was true of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her successor son, Rajiv Gandhi and so also of Narsimha Rao who unsuccessfully tried to revitalize the party. After 1996, the Congress has not been in power, but it continues to depend on a central leader without creating spending adequate effort to create grassroots strength.

The decline of the Congress party can also be attributed to the spread of democratic ideas and intensification of competitive politics in India particularly after the defeat of Congress in 1977 elections that gave a verdict on the

emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Many social groups that routinely accepted the manipulations of political leadership now began to assert themselves and began to struggle for their equal rights under their own organizations and leaders. Leaders, in turn, also found new opportunities to mobilize the deprived and competition in Indian politics sharpened. An important factor that influenced the sharpening of competition was the acceptance of the Mandal Commission that resulted in the introduction of reservation in government jobs and educational institutions for the 'other backward castes'. Together with the scheduled castes and tribes who had been constitutionally provided these privileges, was added another group that essentially consisted of castes working on land and some of whom had done well in the aftermath of land reforms and green revolution.

The Democratic Upsurge

This had a major consequence for the election system. If earlier, the Congress party dominated the election scene the period from 1989 onwards saw a radical change. There were twenty-two political parties in the Lok Sabha in 1984. This number had grown to 40 in 1998. The voter's choice has expanded not only because of the multiplication of parties but also because of their changed nature. The rise of Bahujan Samaj Party is an example of a political formation that represents the Dalits, came to power in one state but has acquired influence in some other states and also attained a national presence in the Lok Sabha. There are state parties that exercise greater influence at the state level but do not shed their ambition of acquiring national recognition. As Yadav (1999:2395) points out, their political presence is state specific but their political vision is not. These are parties like Samajwadi Party or the Samata Party today that go out of the way to claim that they are a national party.

There is also greater participation in the elections. This is not merely in terms of high turnout in Lok Sabha and state assembly elections. What is remarkable is that the underprivileged and the deprived are coming out to vote in greater numbers. The odds that a dalit will vote are much higher today than that of an upper caste. There has also been an increase in women turnout for voting and the ratio was 61.0 percent in 1998. (for data see Yadav, 1999)

Democracy is maturing and with increasing awareness galvanizing the deprived people into joining political activity. Indeed, intense politicization has taken place over the last decade and those who are participating in the new democratic upsurge carry the ambition to use the democratic process to mould policies to their advantage. There is a realization among them that they can capture the instruments of state in the way the upper groups had done so far and use them for their own advantage. As the realization has spread that the state, which

controls a great many resources in a very poor society, can be captured if the support of enough new groups is mobilized, such efforts have intensified. (Kohli, 1996:120) There have been several consequences of this upsurge. There has been multiplication of parties and the domination of a single party has broken down. The diverse and a plethora of politically assertive groups have made consensus hard to achieve. Another consequence is the emergence of an era of coalitional politics. The regional parties are interested in controlling the Center to pursue state interests. Strong regional political leaders have emerged articulating local issues, joining a central coalition with limited national vision. The journey of economic reforms and the buffeting that each policy receives is an ample illustration of attempts by the states to control the Center for their own benefit. The loss of a single party that commands a presence throughout the country like the Congress also has meant the erosion of what can be called a national vision and consensus.

Such fragmentation has come to stay and coalitions do not necessarily mean instability. What it means is that the content of political discourse is changing and demands a new basis of consensus and agreement. Ultimately this may lead to some changes in desirable directions of making democracy and state institutions more open and transparent.

Planning for Economic Development

India's democratic experience is embedded in the strategy of planned economic development. The problem of development was viewed in technical terms and was largely seen as a problem of correct policy and design. The Nehru-Mahalanobis strategy that became the hallmark of the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by the discussion of prioritization of investment allocations, trade and industrial strategies, etc. It is not too much to say that the India development strategy was remarkable in the use of planning models, the sophisticated development that planning engendered, and the extensive utilization of such models with formulation of plans. (Byres, 1997:14)

The successive five-year plans took it for granted that their rationale would be accepted and that the people would behave accordingly. If difficulties arose, they would merely be difficulties of implementation. The development policy design was regarded as technically correct, while failures were seen a result of social and political constraints and problems of poor administration. A vast machinery of controls emerged that attempted to restrict or promote production and consumption of commodities and services according to the priorities laid

down in the plan. When the priorities were not achieved, responsibility was laid at the door of the implementation machinery and few questions about the plan choices were raised.

Public intervention sought to translate plan priorities into practice. This public intervention came through the establishment of large public enterprises, which not only replaced the private sector through nationalization but also entered the commercial sector by restricting the entry of the private sector. The consequence of both the methods of expansion of the public sector was multiplication in the army of state employees. Together with the expansion in public sector, public employees also increased due to state undertaking a development role in society and economy. The economy that emerged was an economy that was directed and regulated by the government with the private sector decisions dependent on government policy. The result was that the growth of the state sector and the emergence of command economy brought into being a potentially privileged political class that consisted of public sector employees and managers, petty and high level officials, professionals and politicians whose power and influence was defined by the extent of ownership of state property, resources and authority. A vast network of privilege and patronage developed. Even many in the corporate sector prospered not because of their entrepreneurial skills but due to their 'connections'.

The market-regulated economy with its attendant patronage system arose at the same time that the Congress party dominated the political system during the Nehruvian and Indira Gandhi period. The incumbency factor helped party building activity through use of state resources in distributing patronage. The economic reforms introduced in 1991 are seeking to shake this nexus between the economy and the polity. One kind of opposition to the reforms comes from the wide spectrum of actors who were the beneficiaries of the strategy of state intervention in the economy and society. If such type of alliances tended to disrupt the goals of industrialization and planned economic development, the rural sector did not present a very different scene.

India inherited a colonial land settlement, which assigned ownership of land to rentier zamindars or cultivators in return for the rent paid to the Raj. Economic power was widely dispersed and also entrenched in these propertied classes. Industry was at a nascent stage but powerful regionally based and family centered business houses had begun to emerge. In both agricultural and industrial sectors there were powerful individuals or groups who commanded significant economic power. This economic power relationship was defended by a powerful social order based on caste, family and region. The development strategy that was hammered out during the early years was one that kept these economic power equations in mind. Dominant caste groups and their

relationships were also kept in mind. The major problems were those of very unequal distribution of land ownership and very low levels of productivity. The power equations severely constrained and strictly circumscribed the capability of the state and its scope of action. In a much later explanation of the lack of investment in long term growth, Bardhan (1984) suggested that the politicians presided over a dominant coalition with three main elements: the industrial bourgeoisie, rich farmers and public sector employees. Each strive to maximize benefits from the development policies and the state was unable to rise above their interests and work for the society as a whole. Radical postures may have been taken but they could not be translated into action. What happened then was that the state was strong on regulatory law and weak on enforcement.

Indian Bureaucracy and Administrative Reform

The faith in ability of the state to be able to take up enormous tasks of development stemmed from the perceived strength and efficiency of the bureaucracy that the British colonial rulers had left behind. At a time when the other developing countries were struggling to establish a professional and career based civil service, the prestige and standing of the Indian Civil Service was exceptional. It had served the colonial masters well and in the initial years of independence, provided tremendous support in quelling riots that followed partition of the country and in helping the integration of the country. The erstwhile masters had quickly taken over the role of upholding the law of the new sovereign state. These civil servants together with their successors, the Indian Administrative Service, also became the great supporters of Nehruvian policy of state led development. The result was that the British legacy of administrative structure and behaviour has remained untouched in the past few decades even when many questions of its suitability have been raised.

From the very beginning of the planning era, the task of implementing the development strategy was entrusted to the civil service, even though Nehru had demanded a radical transformation of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) during the independence movement, and it had been left to Patel to argue for its place in the Constitution. The ICS was seen to present state interests and to be relatively autonomous of local pulls and pressures. The doctrine of neutrality and impartiality was seen as its predominant behavioural trait, and it was assumed that its successor, moulded in the same tradition, would withstand the parochial pressures on the state. Together with Nehru, civil servants were the vanguard for the lobby for an industrial strategy, which created and expanded the public sector. However, the national orientation and professional ethos soon lost its

gloss because public sector undertakings and other developmental projects could not be managed efficiently and effectively.

While the Indian bureaucracy is often cited as having Weberian characteristics, it is not known for creating sufficient state autonomy to pursue developmental interests. It has turned out to be weak instrument of the state and the network that it has created has usually been of rent making variety. There is increasing evidence that the alliance between the politicians and the bureaucrats has been in the pursuit of mutual gain. The demands of career advancement are of paramount significance for a civil servant and an obliging politician is willing to do anything for the civil servant who bends rules to favour his political master. The close linkage of civil servants with caste or communal groups, business houses and the large farmer community has to be seen as serving mutual interests. (Bhambhri, 1998) In spite of this way of actual working, the civil service has grown up in the belief that it is the only group in the political system that works for public interests. It has not been easy for it to give up this self-perception and this has considerably weakened its ability to mobilize support for public policies and their implementation.

In this process, another significant development took place. Over the decades the bureaucrats emerged as powerful component of the decision-making process, largely because the political establishment was too happy to abdicate its responsibility to concentrate more on matters that were political. In providing continuity in civil administration despite political turbulence and change in governments, bureaucracy also proved to be an obstacle in the path of prompt action. "Redtapism" is as much a product of rulebook written by the government as its interpretation and application by bureaucrats. The show of the book has undoubtedly provided the crucial checks and balances required to prevent abuse of power by political authority. But it also led to another consequence. The show of the book as also the style of functioning of the new breed of politicians who see the rule book as an impediment and find the bureaucracy a needless obstacle that conflicts in relationships have emerged. The bureaucrats are apprehensive about their future and their career while the politicians are in a hurry to do things and create a future for themselves in their short tenures. Convergence of these interests has led to the formation of the kinds of alliance mentioned above.

It was not as if there was no concern expressed for poor administrative performance or for the inability of administration to respond adequately to the challenges of implementing development plans. Several efforts at administrative reforms were made. The last concerted effort at administrative reform was the establishment of Administrative Reforms Commission, which submitted its Reports in 1969. Large amount of research involving equally large number of

academics, civil servants and concerned citizens produced the recommendations for what needs to be done. Little headway was made, little impact on the lives of the common citizens took place even though the Estimates Committee dutifully reported to the Parliament on the number of recommendations that were accepted or were under consideration of the government.

If one reason for the failure of administrative reform in our country has been the lack of political and administrative will another has been failure on the conceptual front. Adherence to the Weberian model and Taylorian norms of work has considerably constrained the generation of alternatives. Overwhelming academic response to administrative problems was analysis of structural attributes that caused bottlenecks in coordination or in communication or behavioural frictions in a team where politicians and bureaucrats participated or where interactions with citizens took place. The prescription was already decided and not questioned and therefore when problems persisted, the solution was to increase the dosage of division of labour, increase specialization, and tighten control through improved lines of communication and authority. To cap it all, training was always a rough and ready solution to resolve most problems.

The challenge of the task today has to be seen in the context of several features:

- a. little change has occurred from the kind of administration that we inherited from the colonial rulers
- b. in the process the administrative system has entrenched itself in a way that it has become more or less impervious to change
- c. powerful interests have developed in the status quo
- d. administrative reform has not been a high priority on the political agenda
- e. there has been failure at the conceptual level in generating alternatives.

The present context of administrative reform probably provides an opportunity in several ways.

In the past decade or so, whether by emulation or innovation country after country has decided to change and reform their governments. This change has been triggered by the wave of policies of liberalization and structural adjustment prompted by international financial agencies. So while administrative reforms are profoundly domestic issues the fact they are being seen as part of a package of the “new deal” makes them open to external pressures and influences. Reform is stylish today. And for more than one reason. Technological changes are calling for managerial changes. The information technology with its computer base has caught the imagination of both administrators and politicians. Chandrababu Naidu is a shining example of what the fascination for modern technology can do. In addition commercial and industrial competition with export orientation and thrust towards globalization are compelling governments to downsize their management and work more efficiently. This is apart from the influence that the international financial agencies are exercising on government to reform to be eligible for more loan/aid. There are also now examples from many countries, which have undertaken reforms from which we can learn. The

Fifth Pay Commission has illustrated its discussion with many such country examples.

Another context that has changed is that in contrast to the earlier decades, this time around the administrative reform is being attempted in response to the pressure from the society. There has been deepening of democracy and reforms in the processes of decentralization by giving greater powers to the panchayats have widened the frustration and anger with the way the government functions. This has led to the building of pressures for reform from below. The NGOs are becoming catalytic agents in building a movement for reform. A recent newspaper report (The Hindu 24/12/99) describes how village meetings are being held as public hearings. Through these jan sunwai initiated by Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) opportunity is being given to the people to demand accountability from the government, fight corruption, focus on certain aspects of decentralization and build real democracy.

We can look at the present endeavour of administrative reform more optimistically because of its linkages with international funding agencies and multinational companies that are pressing for reform if the government wants to deal with them, and pressures from the society which is now more aware of the acts of omission and commission of the administrative system. Rising social pressure from the rural society may help to neutralize the reforms that may be undertaken to benefit the privileged only.

The point is that the effort to bring about reform from within has not succeeded. What needs to be taken as a challenge is to facilitate the emergence of such alternative institutions that can force the administration to change. We must realize that high degree of bureaucratic autonomy and capacity may not necessarily lead to development because bureaucracy, as we have seen in Indian experience and elsewhere, has not been able to rise above its interests. On the other hand, market may not be the only answer for it cannot help those that are excluded from it because of various limitations. The solution lies in multiple institutions responding to the needs of the society. These can be bureaucratic, market or participatory institutions. What is needed for reform is the creation of a legal and constitutional situation where this multiplicity can grow. Participatory institutions or market institutions should not be stifled because of an overbearing law or because of lack of legal provisions. The more important direction that reform can take is in providing facilitative legal and contractual arrangements, explicit codification of rights as well as attendant obligations for new institutions to emerge and sustain themselves.

Finally, if one needs to mention the recent documentation of the direction that administrative reform should take but which needs a different forum for

discussion, one need to focus on the Fifth pay Commission and Action Plan for Effective and Responsive Government which was presented to the Conference of Chief Ministers by the Government of India on 24th May 1997. The Eighth Plan had already called for a re-examination of the role of the state and that of the public sector. Guided by global developments in which more and more economies were getting integrated under a common philosophy of growth, market forces and liberal policies, the plan emphasized autonomy and efficiency induced by competition. The state was to allow for the development of capability of cooperative endeavours or community organizations for efficient management of resources and their use. Indeed, the Eighth Plan makes a plea for a greater role of the voluntary sector as well as the market forces. The two documents mentioned above expand on this paradigmatic shift and stress on bureaucratic accountability, decentralization, participation, and community based organizations or NGOs. The big question still remains: Who will implement the suggestions and how?

Parliament and its Diminished Role

In most countries there has been a decline of legislatures. The cabinet and the bureaucracy have gradually eroded the significance of parliament. A prime ministerial system of government seems to be replacing what was traditionally known as the parliamentary one. In the early period of independence, Nehru took special care to give prestige to the parliament by attending its sessions regularly, initiating major policy debates and admonishing members to keep up the dignity of the House. This concern gradually diminished with the Prime Ministers attendance of sessions going down. Parliament also began to spend less time on critical matters of policy and budget. The parliament has increasingly devoted more time to political issues. But this time has increasingly been occupied more by confrontation than debate. People have been treated to unseemly behaviour of the members of parliament physically fighting with colleagues, drowning other people's voices or flouting the ruling of the presiding officers. What was possible on the streets has become possible on the floor of the House. The result has been that during the period 1985 to 1995 discussions on the financial approvals of only a few ministries – seven to be specific- have been taken up. The Demands for Grants for as many as 11 ministries were not taken up for detailed discussion even once and most of the time more than 85% of the Budget was passed without any discussion. (Shastri, 1998:185-86)

Consequently, the role of parliament in providing inputs to policy through discussions on the financial proposals of the government has considerably eroded. The members do not have research assistance and are driven more by the political considerations of their constituencies. The parliament has

increasingly devoted more time to political issues. The result has been that during the period 1985 to 1995 discussions on the financial approvals of only a few ministries – seven to be specific- have been taken up. The Demands for Grants for as many as 11 ministries were not taken up for detailed discussion even once and most of the time more than 85% of the Budget was passed without any discussion. (Shastri, 1998:185-86) In view of this trend, the Parliament decided to set up Standing Committees for most ministries in 1993. These committees consist of members from both Houses of Parliament and chairs are chosen by proportional party representation. Usually highly regarded parliamentarians are chosen to lead the committees even if they belong to the opposition. Every committee has a maximum of 45 members and each Member of Parliament serves a two-year term on at least one committee.

The objective was that this would provide for an opportunity for detailed discussions of the financial proposals and also give the members of parliament an occasion to give more considered opinion on the policy issues as suggested through the proposed budget. The committees were designed to be a mechanism that would provide meaningful dialogue between the government and members of Parliament. A system was established so that the legislators could consider matters of a technical nature that Parliament, as a whole could not take time to discuss. Continuous legislative oversight would ostensibly be produced in a setting where there was a constant turnover as the committees could avail themselves of the testimony of expert witnesses, initiate studies, issue reports, and examine draft legislation as a prelude to legislative action or postponement. (Rubinoff, 1996:727)

Despite the establishment of these committees, legislators are dissatisfied with the way that they can influence the government. Rubinoff (1996) interviewed a larger number of Parliamentarians who felt that the resources that they had at their disposal to perform their tasks were inadequate compared to those available to the executive branch. For the most part, the inadequate time the new committees have had to prepare in-depth studies has led to perfunctory reports not taken seriously by the government or the media. Another significant issue pointed out by Rubinoff (1996) is that there is no incentive for the ministers to take the new committees seriously as long as they do not have to testify before them. With sessions closed to the public and only secretaries (civil servants heading the ministries) required to appear, there is no reason for busy cabinet ministers to participate in committee activities. Since they were not confirmed by the legislature and enjoy permanency of tenure through constitutional provisions, the secretaries who appear are not directly accountable to the parliamentary system. The legislators unable to fall back on alternative sources of ideas or policy are overwhelmed by the arguments put forward by the

bureaucrats. For all these reasons, the committees have not been able to perform an effective role in policy making.

The responsibility of the legislature does not stop at approving the financial outlays at the start of the year. It is also important for the legislature to examine, after the financial year is over, with the help of the audit reports prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, if public money was spent according to its intentions and whether there was any waste, fraud or misuse. The work of the Public Accounts Committee and the Committee on Public Undertakings relies on the audit reports to examine this part of the government activity and these committees have always been considered as important pillars of democracy and its watchdogs. Unfortunately, this examination is also not taken seriously and is delayed by several years. 'As far as it has been possible to find out, the central Public Accounts Committee has not yet given its report about even the Bofors audit which is sometimes credited with bringing down the government of Rajiv Gandhi.' (Joseph, 2000:2999) The financial irregularities that the CAG points out neither catch the attention of the parliamentarians or of the media.

An important bottleneck for members of parliament in taking cognizance of policy ideas coming from diverse sources is the fact that there is no provision of research staff to give them support to identify important issues. Only those issues that are politically volatile and visible tend to catch their attention. This lack of expertise available to the members of parliament has affected the working of the new committee system that has been adopted in 1993. Among political parties in India, tradition of strong research cells to support the legislative activities of its representatives is weak. Parliament has a rudimentary staff that can collect relevant data or refer to important sources. There is a well-equipped library but the actual research or drawing policy implications from data available has to be done by the members of the parliament themselves. Not many are inclined to do so and most do not have the capability even if they may have the inclination. The result is that these committees fall short of the role that Congressional committees play in US even if they are modeled after them. The tendency to pick up politically visible issues or those that will find prominent place in the media becomes strong. Discussions in the Parliament or in the committees are bereft of policy concerns. (see Mathur and Jayal, 1993 for discussion on drought policy in Parliament and Jain, 1995 for similar discussion on electronics policy)

In general, the Parliament has lost its sheen. There is general apathy among its members towards parliamentary work, absenteeism among members has assumed alarming proportions and defections for money and office have been a common phenomenon. (Kashyap, 2000:138) Frequently debates turn into

unruly fighting matches and pandemonium prevails on the floor of the House. The result is that the role of the Parliament as a body that seeks to influence government policy on the basis of it being the voice of the people has suffered considerably. The representatives also do not come from a background that reflects these urges. It is important to point out that the political parties also do not prepare them for this policy role. The parties do not have any research organization that can frame alternative points of view. It is left to the individuals to search for such opinions from professionals and academics that they may know or who are able to invite them to seminars and discussions. Most of such inputs are of ad hoc nature and are generated only through personal volition. The result is that the members of Parliament have rarely demanded research support; more committed among them use the well-equipped parliamentary library or avail of the services of its professional staff.

Another reason why parliamentarians do not demand research support is that they do not consider their role as a lawmaker as very important. The constituency demands are so strong that they can ignore them only at the peril of losing next elections. The constituency sees its MP as an intermediary sorting out all kinds of difficulties between the constituents and the authorities that provide those services. These may range from municipal problems, to getting employment, or even helping to jump the queue in getting air and rail tickets, or gas or telephone connection. As Surya Prakash (1995:50) says 'The MP may be an acknowledged authority on constitutional law, foreign relations or defense. But this will hardly please his constituents. The clogged drains and bad roads will, in all probability seal his fate.'

The Resurgence of Non-Governmental Organizations

With the adoption of economic reform policies in 1991, there has been explicit recognition of the role of markets and non-governmental organizations. The Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992-97) re-examined and re-oriented the role of government by laying considerable stress on strengthening of people's participatory institutions. It suggested that it is necessary to make development a people's movement. The Plan went on to indicate that a lot in the areas education (especially literacy), health, family planning, land improvement, efficient land use, minor irrigation, watershed management, recovery of wastelands, afforestation, animal husbandry, dairy, fisheries, sericulture, etc. can be achieved by creating people's institutions that are accountable to the community. In contrast to the earlier Second Five Year Plan, which stated that 'the state had to take on heavy responsibilities as the principal agency speaking for and acting on behalf of the community as whole', the Eighth Plan made a strong plea for greater role of the voluntary sector. (Mathur: 1996, 24-40)

Organized voluntary action in India has a long history in India. In the first half of the twentieth century, the major factor in the growth of voluntary agencies was the mass mobilization and political campaigns undertaken during the independence struggle. Gandhi's 'constructive work' activities that began from the 1920s had economic and social reform dimensions, which also influenced the growth of voluntary agencies. In the post-independence period, many of these Gandhian organizations were led by public figures that did not (or could not) join the ruling Congress government. These groups worked closely with government for the development of handicrafts and cottage industries, credit and other cooperatives and educational institutions. Official institutions such as the Central Social Welfare Board, Khadi and Village Industries Commission and People's Action Development India were established in 1950s and 1960s to promote and fund a large number of voluntary social work organizations of this kind. (Khan, 1997:5) In the decades beginning 1960s, there was further growth of such organizations with educated and professional people beginning to join voluntary action in large numbers. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that came into being in this way kept close linkage and touch with professional research institutions like the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Institute of Rural Management, Indian Social Institute, Center for Women's Studies etc. Good performance of several NGOs brought recognition to individuals who headed them and government began to incorporate them in official agencies. Sanjit (Bunker) Roy of the Social Work and Research Center (SWRC) Tilonia became adviser to the Planning Commission during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister; Ela Bhatt of SEWA Ahmedabad was nominated as member of the Upper House of Parliament and also appointed Chairperson of National Commission on Self-Employed Women.

Two characteristics of Indian governmental system also influence the behaviour of Indian political leadership. One is that India has a federal system of government. In this federation, however, there are strong centralizing tendencies. For one thing, all residuary powers fall within the purview of the center. Secondly, the center holds the purse strings and has powers to discipline the states both in its financial as well as executive functions. The result is that states are dependent on the center and serve as its executive arm. Thus, much of the educational policy or health policy is decided at the central level but implemented by the states. In many cases, even this arrangement is given a go-by when the center chooses to install its own implementing agency at the field level. The process of planning has given further strength to the supremacy of the central government. An integral part of the struggle by the regional parties coming to power in the states after the decline of the Congress is to demand greater autonomy in local areas of concern.

One aspect of this demand has been to create strong local level democratic institutions of governance. In 1993, Constitutional amendment made this possible by giving considerable autonomy to Panchayati raj institutions that were established at district level and below. Local primary schools and health centers are sought to be put under people's control through these institutions. Assurance of regular elections through a system overseen by the central election machinery tends to provide confidence to village people in getting their representatives elected. Leadership can now be more accountable. It is this process that has led to increasing disenchantment with the traditional leadership and has brought greater opportunity for the deprived groups to articulate their demands. The state and regional leadership is aware of these changes taking place and is speaking with greater strength in demanding resources from the Center.

Another aspect is the demand for greater autonomy for the states. One significant development that has taken place after the liberalization process was initiated has been of states acquiring initiative to negotiate with and attract international agencies and multi-national corporations to invest in projects in their priority. Chief Ministers have undertaken visits to foreign countries to mobilize non-resident Indians and others for investment in their states. More often than not, state loyalties have been evoked and Gujarat or Rajasthan or Andhra Pradesh have especially appealed to their own state Indians living abroad. In some ways this has helped in strengthening regional loyalties. States are also increasingly asserting for greater devolution of financial resources. The recent controversy and debate on the recommendations of the Finance Commission suggests how states can now group together to make their demands.

The Emerging Scenario

The early political leadership intended to shape India into a developmental state through an ambitious strategy of economic planning and by providing autonomy to central institutions of economic decision-making. The technical aura implanted on planning was possible by creating a prestigious Planning Commission as a unique institution away from the normal functioning of the government. It was a tribute to this 'uniqueness' when critics called it a 'super-cabinet'. The Planning Commission was assigned a role notwithstanding the requirements laid down in the distribution of powers within the federal system of government. National Development Council consisting of all Chief Ministers was created as a federal institution to take care of the views of the states in deciding upon development policies. Considerable faith was placed on the civil service in carrying out the development decisions because of its cadre-based structure that placed the ICS/IAS in all critical positions at the Center and the

States. It was assumed, as mentioned earlier, that these services will play a neutral and impartial role and will not be influenced by local pulls and pressures.

This centralizing process of intermeshed state institutions was greatly supported by the centralizing tendencies in the Congress party that dominated the political scene for around forty years. Even during the 1950s and 1960s, control over important decisions was highly concentrated in Jawaharlal Nehru and those close to him. The story about more personal accumulation of power by Indira Gandhi is too familiar to be retold. Rajiv Gandhi made some feeble attempts to reverse these centralization tendencies but gave up quickly. Narsimha Rao knew that his survival lay in keeping final decisions to himself and did not even make any effort to decentralize the system.

This kind of governmental system where the central state institutions held sway is now eroded. The Congress party organization structure, which sustained this centralizing system by continually empowering its leader who was also the Prime Minister, is now in complete disarray. The democratic upsurge has led to the rise of entirely new groups as aspirants of power and with ambition of controlling the state apparatus to corner resources for their benefit. It has also led to formation of parties with regional interests but with national ambitions. Levels of political activity are much higher today than they were in the past. Heightened politicization and growth of large number of assertive and diverse groups has made consensus hard to achieve and it seems that coalitions have come to stay.

Demands for decentralization will grow. As local communities become politicized and begin to assert themselves, first effort will be to struggle for control of local resources. Already this is being reflected in the environmental movements. There will be a rise of community organizations that will demand greater freedom from state control. This process will lead to increasing role of voluntary agencies that will help mobilize local communities for this purpose.

The role of voluntary organizations will also grow as a source of shaping public policy. More and more voluntary groups will try to federate themselves into larger associations to influence public policy. The tendency to take up larger issues that affect wider areas will grow. Water harvesting as a movement to conserve water is spreading from the limited areas where the first experiment were tried. Voluntary Health Association of India is becoming an umbrella organization for a large number of voluntary health groups working in different areas in the country. The Right to Information movement is spreading to different parts of the country and experience in one local area is being transmitted to many others. Such examples are going to multiply.

Panchayats as institutions of local governance will stabilize themselves. With the constitutional amendments, states will concede more powers and responsibilities to the panchayats. State governments will play a supportive role in strengthening local governance.

A centrally administered civil service attempting to bind the entire country together will undergo a change. It will be more state - directed with the Centre establishing norms and standards without the ability to enforce them. Administrative reform to make administration more transparent and responsive to the people will be implemented. Forces of structural adjustment and liberalization, together with technological imperatives and grassroots pressures may provide the best confluence of forces that can break bureaucratic resistance and promote political will to make the administrative system more open to reform and change.

The most significant feature of the changed political system will be regionalization of Indian politics. Two other processes, apart from the ones mentioned above, support the rise of regional parties and regional elites. One is the increasing role of non-governmental organizations in developmental activities at the local level. The leadership of such organizations is rising in visibility and is trying to build national alliances to influence policy. These groups are also helping in the process of deepening democracy. The other process is the emergence of regional capitalists. As Baru (1999:207-230) has shown, the process of agrarian change in agriculturally prosperous states has allowed a new generation of agrarian capitalists or other middle class professionals to make a transition to capitalist entrepreneurs. He has argued that regional political parties have been most active in states where regional business groups have been more dynamic and assertive.

The processes of regionalization in India will gain strength, as globalization and liberalization become the avowed goal of India's development policy. One important implication of this trend at the national level will be the persistence of coalition governments. Regional parties will try to play a national role but this they cannot do without forming coalitions with other parties with similar goals. The culture of coalitions will tend to stabilize. Perhaps the days of a single large national party ruling at the Centre are gone.

One negative consequence of this trend will be that disparities among states will grow. Those states that will develop the capacity to negotiate with global economic actors will have greater opportunities for investment. It does appear

that with development becoming more dependent on market forces and less on state intervention, more endowed regions/districts will do better creating further levels of disparities. Inter-state conflicts may grow leading to states becoming more parochial and narrow-minded in labour migration and employment.

Finally, to conclude, the institutions dispensing justice and arbitrating in disputes between states and the Centre and among states and between people and the State will play increasing role in laying down policies and making the State to act in protecting the rights of citizens. In the emerging scenario, the ability of political parties to resolve social conflicts may decline and the ability of the legislative process in doing the same may suffer. There will be more and more recourse to the Courts and the constitutional arbitration machinery to determine social solutions to essentially political problems.

It is important to point out that democratization of Indian polity is taking place amidst uneven and slow economic development. Pockets of poverty are rising which are engulfing large regions with large populations. Dismantling of a centralized planned system, though replaced by a more liberal regime, and has not yet had an impact on the poor and the marginalized. Privatization and the emphasis on the market is further excluding the dalit and the minorities from the mainstream. Distribution of economic benefits is getting skewed. Obstacles to equal opportunity and more equitable distribution are immense. It will require formidable skills political management and considerable vision to see that the political contestation is not violent and contained within an equitable economic development.

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