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Federalism under the Indira Regime: A Case of Maharashtra in 1970s and 80s

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Indian society is markedly manifest in deep inequalities- at the social, cultural, political and material levels. These disparities and differences were partly inherited during colonialism and partly exaggerated due to practices of electoral democracy in the post independence era. With India adopting a democratic and federal model, these differences, which were social and cultural in nature, were soon translated into political identities. Identities such as caste, religion, language and ethnicity became important conduits through which power was organised. To comprehend how these diversities overtime crystallised into political identities that led to exclusions (economic, political and cultural) one needs to assess the transitions of power in the country- first from the British to the natives and the transition that occurred in the post independence period.

There are two moments of transitions experienced within the democratic phase of post 1947. The first involves the transition in terms of power from the colonial rulers to a select group of elite political actors and public intellectuals, who later framed the constitution and scripted the development agenda of the nation and the second the post Nehruvian period wherein the Indian state recognised the need to allow markets to determine state policies or the age of neo-liberalism. The constitution reflected their imaginings of what the post-colonial “modern” India ought to be. This meant an imposition of the elite notions of modern that was read as secular, federal, democratic republic committed to an ideology of development. In this developmental model, the state controlled the economy and thus all resources. It was hoped that through a “top-down” disbursement of resources through an elaborately setup bureaucracy would ensure that a situation of extreme inequality would not persist and hence a “bloody revolution” would not take place. This would enable a smooth transition of power. But the ideology of development even though rooted in socialism in practice manifested compromises.

The filtering down process had two effects- on the one hand it benefited, one section (other than the elite) of society i.e. the upwardly middle classes who were just below the elite in the hierarchy and on the other it simultaneously led to marginalisation of the already

marginalised. The inequalities deepened and poverty actually increased. By the late 1960s and early 1970s the contradictions that emerged from the developmental model (Nehruvian model of development), led to intense mobilisations around the demand for reprioritising resources on the one hand. The marginalised sections of society that were deprived the access to resources now mobilised themselves into political movements that now questioned the legitimacy of the state. This period witnessed the growth of political movements led by marginalised sections of society i.e. tribal, environmental, linguistic, and regional, caste and class based movements.

On the other hand, with newer opportunities, the upwardly mobile section of society now contested and bargained with the elite for larger share in power. In a situation in which the marginalised sections of society questioned its legitimacy while simultaneously facing an ambitious upwardly section a compromise was reached between the elite and the upwardly mobile section for sharing power. This in effect meant suppression of the popular mass based movements of the marginalised sections. The upwardly mobile groups organised themselves on the basis of primordial ties such as caste, kinship, language, region, ethnicity and religion, thereby masking their class interests.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s there was hardly any resistance left to counter the new alliance in power i.e. the elite and the new upwardly mobile groups. It was in their interest that in 1991 the transition from a developmental state to that of a neo-liberal state took place. The new phase of liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation was flagged off in 1991, which benefited this new alliance the most. In ensuring its rule, this alliance resorts to selective accommodationism while simultaneously resorting to violence to prevent any other group to displace it.

It is in this context of gross inequality, that the paper attempts to capture the politics that occurred during the Indira regime, for organising, maintaining and reproducing power. How did the political elite of the Congress system view issues of poverty and the marginal groups. Were the poor important for them? How is it that they managed to win loyalties of the poor? This article examines the role of the Congress leadership in the State of Maharashtra in India during the Indira regime in organizing a pro-poor welfare state. However before delving into the intricacies of the politics of resource distribution and the political economy of the Indian state it is pertinent to mention here that these primordial identities of caste and kinship continue to influence political mobilisations in the post independence. The encounter with colonialism, in some ways only strengthened identity based politics and thus allowed for a ruling class to emerge that consisted of the land owning castes, the modern bureaucracy and the capitalist class. It is in

this sense that one needs to comprehend the encounter with colonialism and its practices of governmentality.

Kinship based identity politics and networking based on caste became a successful strategy for many of the dominant caste groups in democratic India. Kinship and caste are social institutions that to varying degrees govern the functioning of social, economic and political life of individuals and groups in Indian society. Historians and anthropologists studying kinship imply that it is inherited through blood relations and consists of a structure that bonds families' together- related either by blood (consanguinity) or marriage (affinal). In India, a caste is divided into many sub- castes also called *jatis*. The *jatis* are further divided into lineages. Lineages are exogamous but *Jatis* are endogamous and so is caste. The endogamous nature of the *Jati* system (sub-caste) ensures a distinct kinship pattern. (Karve, 1965)

Kinship, overtime has demonstrated ample flexibility. At disparate points of time it has expanded and contracted. What could be the reason? How and under what circumstances does kinship move beyond the domain of social relations based on blood and marital networking into the domain of political networking, creating enclaves of inclusion through which power is organized? What is the nature of relationship between kinship and caste in Maharashtra?

In the context of modern democracy, how does kinship become an ideology and a strategy to organize a political bloc by generating caste consciousness? Kinship as an ideology is rooted in the cultural and social practices, rather than, as an institution inherited through the bloodline. It is constructed on the basis of trust that gives a sense of belongingness and of membership.

Federalism, Democracy and State programmes in 1970s-80s

The most pressing problem of the national leadership at the eve of independence was the unification of disparate groups and communities into a nation. Additionally there existed a major issue and a problem, that required immediate action i.e. poverty. Scholars such as Kohli (1987), Brass (1993) and Khilnani (1997) argue that there was recognition since independence that poverty existed in the country. Most importantly the leadership recognized that poverty was structural and usually coincided with caste, region and ethnic divisions and assumed that its alleviation would be most effective, if the state could intervene. The national leadership envisioned that the democratic state would be pluralistic in composition and would represent all sections of society and more importantly it would remain as a non-partisan political entity protecting the ideals mentioned in the constitution. (Kohli, 1987, Brass, 1993, Khilnani, 1997)

The imaginings of the architects of the Constitution of India was that they were introducing a democratic framework of governance that would mean that the influence of caste would play a diminishing and waning role in the political life of the nation-state in the years ahead. The introduction of universal suffrage was viewed as a means by which all views and interests would have the opportunity of being heard whilst at the same time providing the vehicle to bring a sense of national life and consciousness of national issues to the mass of India's population. Direct elections to a central parliament and State legislatures, it was argued, would represent the people as a whole and be contested on issues relating to the broad economic and social problems of the mass of Indians rather than narrow parochial caste or communal issues. (Brass, 1993, Khilnani, 1997)

Congress Indira versus Chavan Congress

Yashwantrao Chavan was the Chief Minister when the State of Maharashtra was formed on May 1, 1960. Though this was the victory of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS), the Congress attempted now to show that it was their efforts that gave the Marathi speakers a separate State with Bombay as its capital. Chavan further bolstered this perception by inviting the leaders of the Maratha-Kunbi caste from the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) that dominated the Western Maharashtra region, together with Maratha leaders from other regions such as Marathwada and Vidarbha, to join the government and the Congress Party and to ensure that the government remains sensitive to the cause of rural development. He also revolutionised the core principles of the party by integrating the ideology PWP, that of agrarian development with the Nehruvian notion of development (Lele, 1982,1990). In 1960 he declared,

“Our Five year plans should stress on rural development. The priority of the State is to rejuvenate the agriculture sector. With this in mind, we have to modernize the agriculture and provide impetus to small-scale industrial growth. The above-mentioned goals will be given the utmost importance by the development authorities of the State. Agriculture based industrialization through the co-operatives would be the main goal of the State.” (Translation of a quote by Yashwantrao Chavan in Krishi Audyogic Samajachi Panchvees Varsh, J.F. Patil, K. Patil 1985; 12)

“Mrs. Gandhi wanted to weaken the Co-operative lobby (Western Maharashtra region) and the rich Maratha peasantry, as she knew all too well that they played the role of “King Makers” in the State Politics. This lobby had entrenched themselves into political structures and fashioned strong linkage structures, which in a way guaranteed their political future. As this

section symbolized convergence of both the economic and political elite, it was perceived as a strong forte that did not comply with the interests of Mrs. Gandhi. She sought to unsettle this lobby by appealing to the masses and even to the opposition. Her populist themes were to be the main launch pad from which these rich and powerful Maratha Co-operative leaders were to be challenged.”

Yashwantrao Mohite, an ex- co-operative Minister corroborates this fact

“The Congress members of Indira camp targeted the Sugar lobby. Since the Sugar Co-operatives had become a major source for funding the party, and was a strong fort of the elite Maratha lobby it was targeted. The centre’s policy to subsidise and lower prices of sugar proved detrimental to the sugar Co-operative sector.”

The State Congress party was then led by Y.B Chavan (then a Cabinet minister in Mrs. Gandhi’s cabinet) who had to appropriately respond to this political challenge. Additionally the extended drought situation had weakened the caste solidarity, as there emerged a schism between the Maratha leadership and the Maratha peasantry. The Maratha peasantry was being mobilised by the NPPFs (Shaji, 2005). As analysed in earlier section the Peasants and Workers Party, now an ally of the Congress was also fast losing its support in this constituency. Also these mobilizations were leading to a formation of a new political block led by Socialist Party and dissident members of the Congress Party. It was felt in some quarters that the Maratha leadership was not doing enough to protect the interests of the peasantry that constituted its support base.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the relationship between the Indira regime at the Centre and the Chavan led Congress system in Maharashtra. I have endeavoured to demonstrate how the Maratha Congress leadership countered Mrs. Gandhi’s political insinuations by using her own populist strategy of ‘Garibi Hatao’ (eradicate poverty) to introduce EGS in 1972. The introduction of EGS thus served the short-term goal of the Maratha elite i.e. now the State opposition parties were deprived of issues to challenge the legitimacy of the Congress Party. Moreover, it was deemed to be a fitting response to Mrs. Gandhi’s populist policies. By initiating this progressive programme, the image of the Western Maharashtra Maratha elite within the Congress party was redeemed, and it fit in well into her own strategy of populism. Thus, in one political masterstroke Chavan picked up the demand of the opposing faction and introduced it as a Congress programme.

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