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Author(s): Yogendra Yadav

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Electoral Politics in the Time of Change

India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99

Yogendra Yadav

The popular reading of the last decade of electoral politics is of a rapid decline and impending collapse of Indian democracy. This essay attempts to contest this all too familiar view from above without yielding to the temptation of building its mirror-image. The changing outcome of the electoral game in this decade is seen here as the reflection of a fundamental transformation in the terrain of politics which in turn is anchored in the process of social change. The voters choose differently in this decade, for, the structure of choice inherent in elections has undergone a change. Yet the choice often turns out to be far from the act of sovereignty that the fiction of liberal democracy makes it out to be.

AN attempt to understand the politics of electoral choice in contemporary India brings us face to face with a tension that lies at the heart of India's current democratic transition, if not at the heart of democratic theory itself. The current decade represents the full unfolding of the contradiction between the logic of political equality and that of social inequality, something that Ambedkar had warned against in the Constitution assembly itself. The dynamics of political equality triggered off by the institution of universal adult franchise and the self-reproductive processes of the structure of socio-economic inequality inherited from the past have both crossed a certain threshold without being able to tame the other completely.

As the participatory upsurge leads to the downward spread of democracy, the political processes begin to disturb the inherited ritual social hierarchy and trouble the established elite with hitherto unknown anxieties. Since elections are associated with much of this upheaval, the spectacle of election has come to occupy an aura of 'samudra manthan', the grand ritual churning of the social sea by the small gods of democracy with the help of the modern instrument of a vote. But just as this churning seems poised to yield the proverbial 'amrita', it comes up against the rocky bed of economic inequality. The maya of collective action and the invisible 'rakshasa' called Ideology conspire against all the small gods. The churning does not stop, the spectacle goes on. Yet at some level it turns into a harmless game, subtly delinked from some of the gravest threats it posed to the lords who inherited the sea.

It is hardly surprising that the enactment of this story through a series of elections, all in the course of 10 years or so, has stumped analysts of Indian politics, often deceiving them into a surface reading of the entire process as no more than a horse-race of political entrepreneurs.

Interpreting modern politics is a demanding activity in the best of times. But the cognitive demands placed on the interpreter of contemporary Indian politics appear excessive even by that standard. For one thing, the received conceptual frames of various hues were never designed to grasp the specificity of the path of democracy in a poor, non-western society. Besides, there was no way the feeble intellectual attention given to the task of collecting relevant information and making sense of it in India could have met the scale and the pace of events in the last decade.

The most common reading of the last decade of electoral politics, in its academic and popular versions, is a story of the rapid decline and the impending collapse of Indian democracy. It finds signs of widespread election fatigue leading to popular disinterest in and cynicism towards politics. The last decade stands out for sudden outburst of some of the maladies inherent in our system: the endemic multiplication in the number of political parties and the fractionalisation of the political space; the rise of regional parties and caste-community based parties that threaten to unleash fissiparous tendencies and a clash of primordial loyalties; end of ideology-based politics and the decline of political morality; and, of course, excessive political corruption, non-governance, disorder and instability. To sum up: our politics is one big mess.

The principle ambition of this overview of the electoral politics of the last decade is to contest this all too familiar view from above without yielding to the temptation of building its mirror-image. The changing outcome of the electoral game in this decade is seen here as the reflection of a fundamental transformation in the terrain of politics which in turn is anchored in the process of social change. The voters choose differently in this decade, for the structure of choice inherent in elections has under-

gone a change. The size, the composition and the self-definition of those who choose have changed. More and more citizen from the lower rungs of society participate in this ritual of choosing, they come not as individual but as groups, and they bring with them their own tastes and worldviews. They have much more to choose from and they exercise their right to reject very frequently, as the site of choice has moved closer home. Yet the choice turns out to be far from the act of sovereignty that the fiction of liberal democracy makes it out to be. The voters can choose from a given set, but they cannot determine which set to choose from. They can elect someone and then throw himself out, but there is precious little that they can do to ensure that the representatives actually represent them once in power.

THIRD ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The period since 1989 is best characterised as a new electoral system, the third one since the inauguration of democratic elections in 1952. Normally the expression 'electoral system' is used in the limited sense of the formal rules that specify the procedure (first-past-the-post or the proportional system, for example) followed in elections. In that sense there has been no change in our electoral system. But political historians have also used the same expression to capture a certain constellation or pattern of the outcome and the determinants of electoral choice that characterise a certain period of history.¹ In this substantive political sense, we can talk of a new electoral system when we detect a destabilisation of and its replacement by a new pattern of electoral outcomes as well as its determinants.

In this substantive sense the first four general elections from 1952 to 1967 fall under the first election system. The one party dominance of the Congress meant that the elections in this period were not seriously competitive in this period marked

by a low level of electoral participation. The choice was between the omnipresent Congress and its regionally fragmented opposition; often the opposition came from within the Congress. Electoral loyalties were fixed at the national level unless the constituency level preferences dictated short-term deviations from it. The voter of course did not vote as an individual, but rather as a member of politicised 'jati'. Next to the candidates' party, their jati had some effect on the voting behaviour. In social terms the castes that enjoyed the benefits of early entry into modern education or early politicisation through the national movement or both dominated the list of elected representatives. The 1967 election had already signalled a transition, for the monopoly of the Congress and the savarna jatis was challenged for the first time in north India. The process had started much earlier in the south.

Although Indira Gandhi's unprecedented electoral victory in the 1971 election was initially seen as the restoration of the Congress dominance, in retrospect that election looks like a beginning of the second electoral system. The apparent continuity of the Congress was deceptive; the Congress that Indira Gandhi led to power in 1971 was a new party that had to negotiate a new terrain of electoral politics. The move towards the new system was triggered off by the first democratic upsurge in the late 1960s. The upsurge brought a great many new entrants from the 'middle' castes or the OBCs into the game of electoral politics and turned it truly competitive. Congress was no longer the single dominant party but throughout the 1970s and 1980s it continued to the natural party of governance, the pole around which electoral competition was organised. The success or the failure of the attempts by the 'opposition' to put up a united front against the Congress made a decisive difference to the electoral outcome. Elections turned into plebiscites where the effective unit of political choice was the entire nation, sometimes split along the north-south lines. A typical electoral verdict in this period took the form of a nation-wide or sometimes state-wide wave for or against the Congress. The local specificities of a constituency simply did not matter. These electoral waves flattened the terrain of electoral competition, leaving little room for local variations. In social terms it was a period of cross-sectional mobilisation via state-wide jati alliances like KHAM in Gujarat or AJGAR in Uttar Pradesh. Ideologically, it was an era of populism, as the borrowed framework of western

ideologies was adapted to suit popular taste.²

On the face of it, the 1989 electoral verdict appeared no different from the earlier wave elections of the second electoral system. In many ways that election indeed belonged to the earlier period. The rise of V P Singh had galvanised the opposition to the Congress. The anti-Congress wave in north India followed the same logic of opposition unity (captured so well by David Butler and Prannoy Roy's index of opposition unity) as the 1977 wave. The Congress and the opposition tried their old social alliances. Yet there were signs of the new order yet to be born. Under the umbrella of Janata Dal, state-wide political formations had already begun to exercise a significant role in national politics. Devi Lal and Biju Patnaik were already major political players. The election result also carried signs of shifting social basis of politics: Muslims in UP and dalits and OBCs in Bihar had already begun to upset the given social equations for political parties. In that sense the 1989 election lies at the cusp of the second and the third electoral system.

The decisive stimulus for change came between the 1989 and the 1991 in what was christened as the three Ms of Indian

politics: Mandal, Mandir and Market. The almost simultaneous and sudden occurrence of these three events – the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations for OBC reservations, the BJP's rathayatra that catapulted the Babari masjid dispute into national prominence and the forex crisis leading to the implementation of the first phase of IMF sponsored package of 'liberalisation' – created an extraordinary opportunity for reworking the established political alignments. All the three offered the possibility of creating a new cleavage that cut across the established cleavage structure and thus engaging in a new kind of political mobilisation. Eventually, not all the three cleavages could be activated in politics, at least not in the same degree. But the simultaneity of this change did result in a transition of the electoral system and allowed several latent forces to surface in electoral politics.

The 1991 verdict finally inaugurated the new system. The earlier logic of regime alteration and that of Congress victory in the context of divided opposition clearly indicated a massive victory for the Congress in 1991, a repetition of the 1980 wave. But it did not happen. The Congress improved only marginally, not enough to

TABLE 1: VOTE SHARE OF MAJOR FORMATIONS IN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, 1989-1998

| | 1989 | 1991 | 1996 | 1998 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| Congress | 39.5 | 36.6 | 28.8 | 25.9 |
| Congress allies | 0.3 | 2.1 | 0.9 | 0.3 |
| BJP | 11.5 | 20.0 | 20.3 | 25.5 |
| BJP allies | - | 0.8 | 4.6 | 10.6 |
| Left Front | 10.2 | 9.7 | 9.1 | 7.8 |
| Janata family | 18.7 | 15.1 | 11.4 | 11.2 |
| BSP | 2.1 | 1.6 | 3.6 | 4.7 |
| Independents | 5.3 | 3.9 | 6.3 | 2.4 |
| Other | 23.9 | 10.2 | 15.0 | 11.6 |

Notes: Congress allies: 1989 = UDF partners. 1991, 1996 = UDF partners, AIADMK. 1998 = UDF partners. BJP allies: 1991 = Shiv Sena. 1996 = Samata, HVP, Shiv Sena. 1998 = Samata, HVP, Shiv Sena, Akali Dal (Badal), Lok Shakti, AIADMK, MDMK, PMK, TDP, BJD, Trinamul Congress, Loktantrik Congress. Left Front = CPIM, CPI, FBL, RSP in 1989, 1991, 1996 and 1998. Janata family: 1989 = JD, JP. 1991 = JD, JP(S). 1996 = JD, SP. 1998 = JD, SP, RJD.

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF PARTIES: TOTAL AND EFFECTIVE AT NATIONAL, STATE AND CONSTITUENCY LEVEL, 1952-1998

| Election year | 52 | 57 | 62 | 67 | 71 | 77 | 80 | 84 | 89 | 91 | 96 | 98 |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Total no of parties in Lok Sabha | 21 | 13 | 21 | 19 | 25 | 19 | 18 | 22 | 25 | 25 | 29 | 40 |
| Effective No of parties [National] | 4.1 | 3.5 | 4.2 | 4.7 | 4.4 | 3.4 | 4.2 | 3.9 | 4.7 | 5.1 | 6.9 | 6.9 |
| Effective no of parties [average of all states] | 3.1 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 3.0 | 3.5 | 3.2 | 3.0 | 2.5 | 3.0 | 2.7 | 3.0 |
| Effective no of parties [average of all constituencies] | 3.3 | 3.0 | 2.8 | 2.9 | 2.4 | 2.1 | 2.7 | 2.4 | 2.5 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 2.7 |

Note: All the calculation of the effective number of political parties in this table is based on the vote share of the parties in various Lok Sabha elections and uses the Taagepera and Shugart (1989) formula.

Source: Heath 1999: 66-71.

have a clear majority. But for the additional votes brought in by Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, it would have remained at the same level as in 1989. The BJP's success in UP, Gujarat and Karnataka defied all the established patterns of political sociology and political geography. The state parties did not look like a flash in the pan: they were here to stay. Clearly we were in a new political era. The near majority that Congress mustered allowed it to postpone the arrival of the by now familiar consequences for the new system by another five years. The full implications were to unfold in the 1996 and the 1998 Lok Sabha elections. But the outlines of the new system were clear in the series of assembly elections held between 1993 and 1995.³

Electoral outcomes in the subsequent elections have established beyond doubt that we now live in a different era. But there is no need to recount all the changes here. The rise and fall in the fortune of political parties and leaders in this period is too obvious to be missed out even by a casual spectator. What is required however is an account of what has changed, not by way of events and personalities but with reference to the processes and structures that bind the day-to-day routine of the electoral race. For an obsession with the rapidly swinging fortunes in the political games can turn our attention away from the silent yet fundamental changes in the ground rules of this game. Also, we need to ask whether these fundamental changes have resulted in a meaningful realisation of the promise of electoral democracy, the promise of self-governance.

POST CONGRESS POLITY

The most obvious and easily identified characteristic of the third electoral system is the change in the choice set available to the voter. Table 1 summarises the changes in the vote share for the major political formations since 1989. A continuous decline in the vote share for the Congress in every election stands out as the defining feature of this distribution of vote shares. Clearly the changes are so basic that we are justified in talking of a new party system. In the first two systems under the Congress era the voter exercised only one choice, whether to vote for or against the Congress. That is no longer the case, and not just because there are many non-Congress alternatives. Congress is no longer the pole against which every political formation is defined. In this sense we are in a post-Congress polity now. Even in those states where there is a direct race between the Congress and its rival,

the Congress is no longer the natural party of governance. In fact there is good evidence (see Heath and Yadav in this issue) that the Congress vote in the 1990s is defined by its opponent. Congress picks up residual votes after its opponents have targeted and mobilised a certain section. The vote for the Left Front in West Bengal and Kerala had long ceased to be merely an anti-Congress vote; it is more meaningful to see the Congress vote in West Bengal as anti-Left Front vote. In Delhi, Rajasthan and Gujarat the Congress has been replaced by the BJP as the natural party of governance. In Bihar, UP and Tamil Nadu any talk of Congress/anti-Congress vote is bound to invite ridicule today. Unlike the BJP, the Congress is yet to accept the imperatives of coalition politics and alliance building. The way three of its strong units (Maharashtra, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu) broke away from the parent party and does not augur well for the future of the party. The Congress is there to stay but the Congress era in politics is behind us.

The rise of the BJP to power and a consistent rise in its vote share with every election since 1984 has been accompanied by a three-dimensional expansion in the 1990s (Olliver Heath in this issue). In geographic terms it has expanded much beyond its north Indian, Hindi heartland core to include Gujarat and Maharashtra in its core areas. More importantly it has developed substantial presence in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar and a foothold in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. In social terms it is no longer an urban bania-brahmin party. It has developed a formidable rural base, extending well into the lower OBCs and

some adivasis. The BJP and its allies were the highest vote getter not only among the upper class Hindus but also among the OBCs as a bloc. In political-ideological terms, the party has expanded to win the confidence of various allies who have little patience with its Hindutva ideology. In this respect the formation of the National Democratic Alliance, the alliance with DMK and PMK in Tamil Nadu and with splinter JD in Bihar and Karnataka on the eve of 1999 elections symbolises the extent to which the BJP has been able to erase its status of a political untouchable in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babari masjid.

The third space – the alternative outside the Congress and the BJP fold – has seen major ups and downs in this period. Yet some developments are here to stay. The rise of the BSP as a recognised national party deserves more notice than it has received. After all, it is the first truly new party – whose genealogy cannot be traced back to the parties at the time of independence – that has managed to cross the high threshold of viability under our first-past-the-post system. Most other new entrants have managed to cross the threshold only at the state level. In this context the rise of state parties has changed the nature of political alternatives. Parties like the Samajwadi Party, Samata Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Nationalist Congress Party and arguably Mamata's Trinamool Congress or the TMC in Tamil Nadu are not cast in the same mould as the classical regional parties like the Akalis or the DMK or the TDP. Their political presence is state specific but their political vision is not. Each of these would go out of their way to claim that they are a national party.

TABLE 3: AGGREGATE VOLATILITY BETWEEN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, 1977-1998

(Per cent)

| Election years | 1977-1980 | 1980-1984 | 1984-1989 | 1989-1991 | 1991-1996 | 1996-1998 |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Aggregate volatility | 23.8 | 21.5 | 16.1 | 11.8 | 12.9 | 14.7 |

Notes: Aggregate volatility is calculated by measuring the 'swing' between a party's vote share between two elections. The value reported in the table is the sum of the swing for all the parties divided by two. Where new parties have emerged, or split, the entire vote share of the new party is taken as the swing. In this calculation Only parties that gained either at least one seat or at least 1% of the national vote are included in the swing calculations. Independents have been excluded. Only parties that gained either at least one seat or at least 1 per cent of the national vote are included in the swing calculations. Independents have been excluded.

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

TABLE 4: TOTAL SEATS RETENTION BETWEEN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, 1977-98

| | 1980 | 1984 | 1989 | 1991 | 1996 | 1998 |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Seat | 154 | 338 | 200 | 301 | 264 | 263 |
| Per cent | 28 | 62 | 37 | 55 | 49 | 48 |

Notes: The table reports the number and percentage of the seats retained by all the parties in any Lok Sabha election

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

In some sense the Left parties belong to the same category. They are the only formation not to have undergone a basic change in its geographical or regional profile in the last decade, though have lost some votes, are more confined to their regional pockets and are a little more lower class- and caste-based than before. The third space has emerged in this decade as the spring of political alternatives. While its failure to consolidate into an all-India third formation has greatly reduced its say in national politics, this failure has also kept open a diversity of political choices within the mainstream of national politics.

POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION?

If the electoral choices available to the voter are to be judged by the number of political parties that seriously contest the elections and can put up viable candidates, there is some expansion of the choices available in the third electoral system. The number of political parties that have gained entry to the Lok Sabha has gone up dramatically in the last Lok Sabha. This does not indicate their real strength. There is little evidence to support the popular belief that this figure reflects a fragmentation of the party system or a mad proliferation of parties. Yet if we calculate the number of parties by their effective share of votes or seats, we find a marginal increase. But that is a function of artificial aggregation at the national level. If we look at the number of effective parties at the state level or at the constituency level, we find basically a bipolar competition. Duverger's law that postulates the emergence of two-party system in a first-past-the-post electoral procedure does work in India too, except that it works at the state level. Instead of producing a simple bipolarity at the national level, it has resulted into 'multiple bipolarities' (Sridharan nd). It does indicate an expansion in choice, but not of the kind suggested by the first impression of the national figure of the number of political parties.

Notwithstanding the new entrants, our system continues to maintain high barriers for newcomers, especially for those that operate at the level below that of a state. In practice all the peoples movements that stand for attempts to build political alternative operate at a local level and find it impossible to cross the minimum threshold of viability. The last decade has seen various experiments by the erstwhile non-party political formations to register their presence in the electoral arena: Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, Karnataka Rajya Rayyata Sangha, UTJAS in north Bengal, Samata Sangathan in Orissa and Bihar, Bahujan

Mahasangha in Maharashtra, to name a few. The eventual outcome has either been a complete failure (even in those areas where these movements and their leaders have for a long time enjoyed mass support) or a gradual absorption after initial success. Clearly the present system has little room for micro political action to translate into effective political alternative. The failure of any third force to develop downward linkages with grassroots movements and upward linkages with each other in a national framework largely accounts for an the absence of genuine and effective political alternative in the Third Electoral System.

Does the voter use the vote more effectively? If electoral volatility is any measure of the effective use of vote in mass elections, a simple look at the data may suggest that the voters are less decisive now than they were before. The era of wave elections witnessed massive swings between two elections. The 1990s have not witnessed anything like that. Table 3 quantifies this impression and shows that if we sum up all the swings for various parties, there has been a decline in it in the 1990s. The last three elections have not seen anything of the kind of swing witnessed in the previous three elections. The figures for the last two elections would have been lower than the table depicts, if the artificial effect of the formation of new parties or party splits was taken out of the calculation.

But as in many other cases, the aggregate figures conceal more than they reveal. As Tables 4, 5 and 6 show quite conclusively, the elections of the 1990s have seen a very high degree of volatility. Table 4 shows that although the overall

composition of Lok Sabha has not changed very much, an extraordinary proportion of seats have changed hands between two elections. In the last two elections more than half of the seats have changed hands, a very high figure by any standard. Table 5 confirms this impression by examining the 'hard core' evidence of survey panel. It shows that all the parties, including those in ascendancy lose anything between 35 to 50 percent of their voters across two elections, another unusually high figure. A third way to examine the volatility is to look at how the incumbent governments fared in the various assembly elections since 1989. Table 6 shows that the failure rate of the incumbent governments at the hustings is as high as 77 per cent. The figure touches 82 per cent if we look exclude the small states and Uts where competitive politics is sometimes yet to take off. In other words, barring a few exceptions, all the state governments have faced defeat at the polls in this period. And those who did not were governments that did perform in one respect or the other.

Clearly, whatever the choice set available to the voters, the election outcome of the last decade indicates that they use it quite effectively and often in a very discerning manner.

The voters have also been effective in bringing about a noticeable change in the composition of the political elite. Politics of presence or representational democracy is the most immediate form of assertion by the newly enfranchised communities. To those already enfranchised, this is the time to go for the higher forms of political representation. To be sure this change is very uneven and holds mainly for numerically large and electorally

TABLE 5: VOTE RETENTION BY PARTIES/ALLIANCES BETWEEN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, 1991-1998

| | INC+ | BJP+ | NF/UF | LF | BSP |
|---------|------|------|-------|----|-----|
| 1991-96 | 53 | 65 | 53 | 68 | 56 |
| 1996-98 | 53 | 63 | 38 | 61 | 41 |

Note: Table entries refer to the percentage of those who voted for a party in the previous elections who continued to vote in the next one. The data includes only panel respondents. The data on 1991 is based on recall in 1996 pre-poll survey.

Source: NES 96, NES 98

TABLE 6: INCUMBENT PARTY'S PERFORMANCE IN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1989-1999

| | Total Number States | Information Available on No | Incumbent Won | | Incumbent Defeated | |
|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|----------|--------------------|----------|
| | | | No | Per Cent | No | Per Cent |
| Major states | 35 | 33 | 6 | 18 | 27 | 82 |
| Minor states/UTs | 28 | 24 | 7 | 29 | 17 | 71 |
| All states | 63 | 57 | 13 | 23 | 44 | 77 |

Note: Major states include all the states with 10 or more Lok Sabha seats. The rest, including Uts with elected assemblies are treated here as minor states/UT. Those cases where it was difficult to determine who was the incumbent or who really won the election have been excluded as No Information.

Source: CSDS Data Unit

decisive communities. As such the OBCs are the biggest gainer in the race for political parties to accommodate them in their organisational and legislative wings. There is no appreciable increase in the presence of women in the legislatures, nor have the Muslims gained much from it. Yet times of political turbulence, close electoral contests and frequent elections bring numerous gains to marginal groups. A large number of lower OBC castes have had their first MLA or the first MP in this decade. It is in this decade that India had two prime ministers from the south and the first dalit woman as the chief minister.

DEMOCRATIC UPSURGE

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 is expanding in the 1990s. Once again, aggregate figures can be deceptive here. The upsurge does not always show up in any dramatic jump in the overall turnout figures and that is why analysts have tended not to notice it. Table 7 presents these overall turnout figures. But now there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the electoral political arena in this period has witnessed greater participation and more intense politicisation than before.⁴ This tendency is particularly strong among the shudras, used here as a generic category for all the marginal social groups including women.⁵ The dominant peasant proprietor OBCs were already fairly politicised in the second system, but now there is an extension of this trend to the lower OBCs as well. Table 8 presents the odds ratio for voting for different caste, community or class groups. The odds that a dalit will vote are much higher today than that of an upper caste. This has been accompanied by a significant rise in their sense of efficacy and their involvement in more active forms of political participation. This is perhaps due to the fact that it was only in this decade that a sizeable chunk of dalit electors were able to actually exercise their voting right for the first time, especially in north India. The huge turnout gap between the adivasi and the non-adivasi voter has been bridged in the last three elections, though the adivasi citizen is yet to catch up in the active forms of political participation. Table 9 looks closely at the women's turnout to show that the proportion of women among the voters has gone up after stagnating for nearly two decades. Their proportion among the politically active citizen has also registered a major leap. Table 10 looks at the turnout for different constitu-

encies grouped by their degree of urbanity. We know that in the first two decades of electoral democracy, urban areas recorded higher turnout. Now the rural constituencies have overtaken the urban constituencies in electoral turnout.

As shudra participation has increased in the last ten years, the socially and the economically privileged sections of society have recorded decreasing levels of political participation. An urban, educated, upper caste citizen is far more likely to be non-participant and cynical about matters political than his counterpart among the rural, uneducated, lower caste. Even a cursory look at the participation profile in other democracies is enough to demonstrate that this trend is very unusual. The textbook rule about political participation is that the higher you are in social hierarchy, the greater the chance of your participating in political activity including voting. Contemporary India is perhaps the only exception to this rule among functioning democracies in the world today. The participatory upsurge of the shudras is the defining characteristic of the Third Electoral System. The continuous influx of people increasingly from the lower orders of society in the arena of democratic contestation provides the setting, the stimuli and the limits to how the election system unfolds.

CREOLISATION OF DEMOCRACY

The influx of lower orders into the field of democratic contestation has left its impressions on the vocabulary of this contestation, for the new entrants brought with them their beliefs as well. For the first time the neat arrangement of the borrowed high ideological spectrum was disturbed by homespun ideological fragments. The

raw narratives of social justice articulated by a Kanshi Ram or a Laloo Prasad Yadav achieved what Lohia's sophisticated philosophy of history failed to do three decades ago, namely, to make it respectable to talk about caste in the public-political domain. The emergence of 'social justice' as a rubric to talk about caste equity, political representation of castes and communities and issues of communitarian self-respect and identity is a distinct achievement of this period.

Yet the participatory upsurge has not led to anything like an effective control of the lower orders on the issues or the agenda

TABLE 8: ODDS-RATIO FOR VOTING: 1971 AND 1996 AND 1998

| | 1971 | 1996 | 1998 |
|------------------------|------|------|------|
| <i>Community</i> | | | |
| Hindu Upper | 1.11 | 0.90 | 0.97 |
| Hindu OBC | 0.82 | 1.07 | 0.94 |
| SC | 1.04 | 1.22 | 1.21 |
| ST | 0.65 | 0.91 | 0.95 |
| Muslim | 1.59 | 0.92 | 1.12 |
| Sikh | 1.53 | 0.86 | 1.60 |
| Christian | 2.29 | 1.13 | 1.05 |
| <i>Economic status</i> | | | |
| Very Poor | 0.89 | 1.24 | 0.92 |
| Poor | 0.98 | 1.13 | 1.05 |
| Middle | 1.14 | 0.94 | 1.18 |
| Upper middle | 1.06 | 0.89 | 0.96 |
| Upper | 1.38 | 0.75 | 0.75 |
| <i>Education</i> | | | |
| Illiterate | 0.82 | 1.03 | 0.91 |
| Up to middle | 1.49 | 1.01 | 1.33 |
| College | 1.29 | 1.05 | 0.91 |
| Graduate | 1.07 | 0.70 | 0.66 |

Notes: The variable for constructing the economic status of the respondents was derived from their type of occupation and amount of land owned, and in 1971 and 1996, family's monthly income and in 1998 the type accommodation.

Source: National Election Study [NES] 1971 and NES 1996 and NES 1998

TABLE 7: TURNOUT IN LOK SABHA AND MAJOR ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1952-1998

| Lok Sabha elections | | Major State Assembly Elections | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Year | Turnout (Per Cent) | Year | No of States | Turnout (Per Cent) |
| 1952 | 45.7 | 1952 | 22 | 46 |
| 1957 | 47.7 | 1957 | 13 | 48 |
| 1962 | 55.4 | 1960-62 | 15 | 58 |
| 1967 | 61.3 | 1967 | 20 | 61 |
| 1971 | 55.3 | 1971-72 | 21 | 60 |
| 1977 | 60.4 | 1977-78 | 24 | 59 |
| 1980 | 57.2 | 1979-80 | 16 | 54 |
| 1985 | 64.1 | 1984-85 | 18 | 58 |
| 1989 | 61.9 | 1989-90 | 18 | 60 |
| 1991 | 55.9 | 1991 | - | - |
| 1996 | 57.9 | 1993-96 | 25 | 67 |
| 1998 | 62.1 | 1998 | 4 | 63 |

Note: A 'major' round of assembly elections is defined here as one which involved, within a year or two, elections to at least 2000 assembly constituencies. The figures for the last column do not conform to this definition. Calculations include provisional figures for state assembly elections held in 1995, the report for which has still not been released by the Election Commission.

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

of elections. The very raw narratives that ensured the presence of social justice as a theme also allowed for the marginalisation and containment of this concern. The homespun ideological fragments of this period were based on very small visions that failed to develop linkages with other larger issues. A support for caste based reservations, for instance, did not translate into any concrete stance on the Babari masjid dispute or on liberalisation and globalisation. This failure was most marked in the realm of the economic policy which was effectively withdrawn from the menu available to the voter.

This was made possible in large measure by the bifurcation of the electorate into two circles of intelligibility.⁶ While the new entrants to democratic politics struggled to express their local concerns and interests in the alien vocabulary of liberal democracy, the elite marched further away for its rendezvous with the so called global village. This gave rise to two radically different languages of politics corresponding to the 'Bhasha'/English divide. The former, a language of democratic rights and social justice, was deployed to win elections while the latter, a language of macro-economic and bureaucratic management, guided the framing of policies. While one section had the consolation of winning the elections, the other could continue to rule. Just when the lower order had some access to political power, the most significant economic decisions were removed from the political agenda.

If one goes by the popular accounts, the rise of casteism and its grip over electoral politics is the distinctive attribute of the 1990s. But such an account suffers from serious flaws. For one thing, caste has been operating in electoral politics for as long as we know. Candidates' jati was a crucial factor in electoral success even in 1950s. Besides, the relationship between caste and politics is not just one way traffic. Politics has affected castes as much as caste affects politics. What is distinctive about the current phase is not the 'deadly' mix of these two or the vicious grip of caste over politics but rather the manner in which politics has come to shape caste identities.

In the first electoral system, the effective social bloc was a jati in its local setting. In the Second System, jati remained the primary bloc but the game of manufacturing electoral majorities led to the building of state-wide alliance of jatis. An extension of the same search for stable electoral majorities has led to the replacement of jati by state-wide jati clusters or

varna like jati groupings as the primary social bloc for political mobilisation. The emergence of upper caste or upper/lower OBC or dalit as more or less homogenous category in some north Indian states is a pointer in this direction. The same process can be seen at work in the emergence of numerically large castes by combining more than one traditional jatis: Kshatriyas in Gujarat, Maratha-Kunabi in Maharashtra, Ahirs in Bihar, Rajbanshis in Bengal or Bhandaris in Goa are but a few example of the shifting definition of the primary social unit itself. To be sure, this development cannot be dated back only to the last ten years. Many of these communities had started evolving much earlier. Nor does this new process work to the exclusion of the earlier model of jati alliances. Yet it captures something of the qualitative change in this respect.

Beyond this level of generality, there is very little that is common to all the states in terms of the patterns of social cleavages activated by politics. Not only are the specific combinations unique to each state due to its social demography, but the nature of cleavage itself varies from state to state. If Andhra and Rajasthan represent a con-

test between two catch-all parties, UP and Bihar show evidence of extreme jati/varna polarisation. If religious cleavage accounts for voting differentials in Kerala and Punjab, it is class in Delhi and Bengal. If the Congress is a party of the downtrodden when it faces the BJP in the north-west, it represents privileges where it confronts the Left Front. The BJP combines its upper caste votes with different social groups in different states. The erstwhile Janata Dal represented three radically different social groups in the three states where it mattered: cross-sectional support with accent on the upper castes in Orissa, dominant peasant proprietors in Karnataka and dalit-lower OBC in Bihar. Such a differentiation of the social cleavages is itself a new feature of the third electoral system. While it allows various marginal communities to have a say in the state politics, such a large variety has not allowed the building of a larger coalition of marginalised communities that might give them a role in the national politics.

Another common belief in this respect is that whatever the exact nature of the social cleavages, there is a tendency towards greater political polarisation along

TABLE 9: WOMEN'S TURNOUT AND WOMEN AS PROPORTION OF TOTAL VOTERS, LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, 1957-98

| Year | Women (Per Cent Turnout) | Men (Per Cent Turnout) | Women (Per Cent of Total Voters) | Turnout Index | Odds Ratio |
|------|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------|------------|
| 1957 | 38.8 | 55.7 | 38.3 | 0.81 | 0.50 |
| 1962 | 46.6 | 62.1 | 39.8 | 0.84 | 0.53 |
| 1967 | 49.0 | 61.0 | 42.0 | 0.88 | 0.62 |
| 1971 | 49.2 | 61.2 | 42.4 | 0.89 | 0.61 |
| 1977 | 54.9 | 65.4 | 43.6 | 0.91 | 0.65 |
| 1980 | 51.2 | 62.2 | 43.1 | 0.90 | 0.64 |
| 1984 | 59.3 | 68.4 | 44.5 | 0.93 | 0.67 |
| 1989 | 57.5 | 66.4 | 44.1 | 0.93 | 0.68 |
| 1991 | 50.5 | 60.7 | 42.9 | 0.88 | 0.66 |
| 1996 | 53.4 | 62.1 | 44.0 | 0.92 | 0.70 |
| 1998 | 61.0 | 65.9 | 46.9 | 0.98 | 0.81 |

Notes: (1) Column 4 shows the percentage of women as a proportion of the total turnout. (2) The turnout index controls for the uneven size of the male and female electorate by expressing the proportion of women in turnout relative to the proportion of women in the electorate. For example, in 1998 women accounted for 46.9 per cent of the total voters and 47.7 per cent of the total electorate. We can therefore express the proportion in turnout as a fraction of the proportion of the electorate. Thus, $46.9 / 47.7 = 0.98$. If women had accounted for 47.7 per cent of the total voters then their proportion in turnout would have been equivalent to their proportion amongst the electorate and the turnout index would have equalled 1. (3) The odds ratios measure the ratio between the odds of women voting and men voting.

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

TABLE 10: TURNOUT BY DEGREE OF URBANITY IN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, 1977-1998

| Locality (Per Cent Urban) | 1977 | 1980 | 1984 | 1989 | 1991 | 1996 | 1998 |
|------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Rural (up to 25 per cent) | 60.3 | 56.7 | 64.1 | 62.6 | 56.6 | 58.7 | 63.0 |
| Predominant Rural (26-50 per cent) | 60.4 | 57.8 | 64.8 | 62.7 | 56.8 | 59.0 | 62.9 |
| Urban (51 per cent and above) | 62.1 | 57.9 | 62.9 | 60.0 | 50.4 | 53.4 | 56.7 |

Notes: Table entries are for average turnout (in per cent) for the three groups of Lok Sabha constituencies according to the estimated proportion of urban electorate. The estimates have been developed by comparing the 1991 Census figures for urban population with the electorate size in 1991 Lok Sabha elections.

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

those cleavages. Once again the available evidence does not support this belief.⁸ It is true that the rise of a party like the BJP that has skewed social base did increase the overall level of ethnic/social polarisation in the early 1990s. In a state like UP where the BJP faces two other skewed parties in the BSP and the SP, there is an unusually high level of polarisation of votes along caste/community lines for the last decade. But that is not true of the rest of the country. Infact the 1998 elections revealed a decline in the overall level of polarisation. And, whatever the result of the 1999 election, the polarisation is likely to be even lower this time.

The final feature, namely the emergence of state as the effective unit of electoral choice, does not follow from any of those mentioned above; infact there is some case for arguing that the above mentioned features are a result of the last one. Electoral choice in the Lok Sabha elections in the 1950s and 1960s was hardly influenced by the boundaries of the state. Under the Second system, the state were a distant secondary consideration in the nation-wide plebiscites. Barring states like Kerala and West Bengal that had emerged as exceptions, it was the north-south distinction that made any difference to the electoral outcomes rather than state boundaries. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s people voted in the state assembly elections as if they were electing a prime minister. The 1990s have seen a radical shift in this respect. There is an unmistakable foregrounding of her state in the political horizon of an ordinary citizen. Political loyalties, opinions and even social identities are now chosen at the level of the state. Now people vote in the parliamentary elections as if they are choosing a state government. State specific electoral verdicts, the rise of state-wide parties and the emergence of state-wide jati/varna clusters as the effective categories of electoral mobilisation in the 1990s are all manifestations of this structural attribute.

The rise of state politics has been viewed with considerable suspicion by the English press as the beginning of political fragmentation if not balkanisation of India. Such a reading fails to note that this development is a function of an aggregative rather than disintegrative process at work in our polity. It is better interpreted as the first step on the Indian path towards the creation of a mass society through the mechanism of competitive politics. In a continental size polity like ours, it is precisely by articulating rather than suppressing the distinctiveness of states that

a context for massification is prepared. Far from setting the stage for further fragmentation or effective decentralization within these states, the rise of the states indicates a high degree of homogenisation within each of these states. Whatever the implications for national integration, it is fairly clear that its implications for Indian democracy are positive. The context of state politics brings political choice closer to the every-day political experience of the people and gives them an opportunity to evaluate the governance that affects them most. That still leaves out a nuanced constituency specific assessment by the voters, but arguably the micro-level anti-incumbency at work in the 90s takes care of that gap.

In the limited sense described above, the third electoral system represents a relative expansion of democratic choice for the voters as well as their efficacy. But if we raise these questions at a more fundamental level, we confront the limits of what may have been achieved. Does the increase in the number of political options represent a substantive expansion of choice? Or do we have more of the same, or perhaps more of less? This is not to reiterate the universal scepticism about the nature of choice in liberal democracies. In recent times the political space in India has shrunk markedly because the mainstream parties, mainly the Congress and the BJP, are more like each other in all the crucial policy matters. The entire political spectrum of mainstream political options offers a very small range of policy options. This problem becomes compounded if we add the difficulty of exercising whatever policy options may be available. Here again the reference is not merely to the gap between the promise and the reality of collective action in any situation. In contemporary India the chain that links peoples' needs to their felt desire to their articulated demand to its aggregation and finally to its translation into public policy is impossibly long and

notoriously weak. People often use elections effectively to choose their representative and the government but rarely can they use elections to choose policies about issues that matter most to them.

Notes

- 1 In the context of the US political history, see Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979). The case for taking seriously the US political history of the late 19th century for understanding contemporary India has been argued persuasively by Robin Archer 'American Communalism and Indian Secularism: Religion and Politics in India and the West', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXIV (15), April 10, 1999.
- 2 I have narrated the story of the last fifty years at greater length in my contribution on 'Politics' to the special issue, *India Briefing: A Transformative Fifty Year* (Armonk, NY: M E Sharpe, 1999)
- 3 For an overview of that round and a first sketch of the outlines of the new system see my 'Re-configuration in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections, 1993-95', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXI (2-3), January 13-20, 1996.
- 4 I have tried to look at a wide variety of evidence in my 'Second Democratic Upsurge: Patterns of Bahujan Participation in Electoral Politics in the 1990s' in the volume edited by Francine Frankel (Delhi: Oxford University Press, in press). The conclusions offered in this and the following para are taken from that paper.
- 5 I follow here the original meaning of the term 'shudra politics' by Lohia.
- 6 This expression is borrowed from Sudipta Kaviraj's analysis of the nationalist discourse. Several Subaltern Studies historians have made a similar point about the disjunction between elite ideologies and mass beliefs. Partha Chatterjee's remarks on the parallel between the peasant insurgencies in colonial India and electoral waves in post-colonial times point in the direction of a sub-field of research that is waiting to be developed.
- 7 D L Sheth's paper 'Secularisation of Caste' is to my mind the most comprehensive and nuanced recent statement on the vexed relationship between caste and politics.
- 8 Preliminary conclusions based on the joint ongoing research on the changing pattern of community and vote from 1962 to 1998 by me and Anthony Heath.

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