

# Reconfiguration in Indian Politics

## State Assembly Elections, 1993-95

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*The assembly elections in as many as 16 states between November 1993 and March 1995 provided the first full view of India's post-Congress polity. The elections ushered in a new era in the country's politics, marking the beginning of the third phase in the reconfiguration of the party system.*

*The first phase of the famous 'Congress system', characterised by single-party dominance, lasted the first two decades after independence. The second phase, which may be called the 'Congress-Opposition system,' was still characterised by the one-party salience, though no longer dominance, of the Congress. Despite remaining out of power very often, the Congress retained a salience in the party system not only because it continued to command greater popular support than any opposition party, but also because it was the core around which the party system was structured.*

*The third phase, inaugurated by the assembly elections of 1993-95, definitely signals a move towards a competitive multi-party system which can no longer be defined with reference to the Congress. While it may be too early to expect a fully worked out picture of what the post-Congress system would look like, a comparison of the 1993-95 elections with elections in the previous phases of Indian politics brings out some of the enduring structural changes which have redefined the terrain of electoral politics.*

A FUTURE historian may remember the three rounds of assembly elections held in 16 states from November 1993 to March 1995 as having ushered in a new phase in democratic politics in India.' This is not because they announced with a bang a completely new kind of politics. On the contrary, the verdict is far from obvious, shrouded as it is in a series of apparently localised verdicts and the notorious contingencies of routine politics, such that, at the end of the day, there is no clear winner. Besides, on the face of it, there is no clear pattern in the messy verdict of this first major set of elections since the demolition of Babri masjid, inauguration of the New Economic Policy and the departure of the last charismatic leader of the Nehru dynasty. The horizons of future, however, may place these elections in a different light and bring out the significance denied to us by our proximity. In fact it might indicate, that without much noise or drama, quietly and almost casually, these state elections have provided the first full view of the post-Congress polity. It is a complex picture as compared not only to the sweeping electoral waves of the 1970s and 1980s but also to the uncertain verdicts of the last two general elections. But that is precisely what makes it cognitively more valuable to a student of Indian politics. In other words, what appears like a mess needs to be recognised as a new pattern. Though it may have to wait till the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections or a little longer to be recognised as such, this new pattern holds the key

to making sense of the future of Indian politics.

While it would be inaccurate to characterise the change as 'realignment', for the Indian electorate has never been aligned with parties in the classical western sense, it may also not be appropriate to see the new pattern either simply as a radicalisation of democracy or as a plain degeneration. The reconfiguration intensifies the tension between two fundamentally conflicting tendencies in Indian politics. While the process of democratisation has advanced further thanks to higher mobilisation and greater politicisation, particularly of the

marginal sections, this democratic upsurge has not been translated effectively into the institutionalised world of politics. Electoral volatility has opened up fresh possibilities without leading to transformative politics. Political parties have expanded their reach but their legitimacy has been deeply eroded. The consolidation of the party system at the state level cannot be aggregated at the national level. The Congress definitely shows signs of a long-term decline at a time when the task of occupying the middle ground has become impossibly difficult. The effective regionalisation of the polity has been accompanied by an equally powerful internal

**Most of these papers on the state assembly elections, 1993-95, have been written as a part of, or in association with, the ongoing Election Study Project of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. The first versions of a majority of these papers were presented at the ICSSR-sponsored national seminar on 'Assembly Elections and Their Political Implications' held at the India International Centre, New Delhi, on May 9-10, 1995. The remaining were first presented at a workshop on Assembly Elections, November 1993, held at the CSDS on April 9-10, 1994. The papers have been put together in the present form by an editorial collective comprising Partha Ghosh of the ICSSR and V B Singh and Yogendra Yadav of the CSDS. They would like to thank Indian Council of Social Science Research for funding the seminar and preparation of the manuscript. Thanks are also due to Rustam Singh, CSDS, for copy-editing the papers, Sanjay Kumar for research support and Kanchan Malhotra, K A Q A Hilal and Himanshu Bhattacharya of the Data Unit, CSDS, for compilation and analysis of election results.**

*Ed.*

homogenisation and the creation of a thin, slippery terrain. Radical concerns find a place in the political discourse but in an exclusivist and fragmentary mode. Finally, the second democratic upsurge takes place at a time when the logic of carrying on democracy without prosperity is beginning to tell, when economic limits to politics have got more pronounced and as a result, the democratic enterprise itself faces a serious if not immediate threat. If democratic politics is headed for a crisis, it is a crisis with transformative potentials.

That this pattern should reveal itself in the electoral arena first is hardly surprising. Over the last two decades, elections have acquired a political salience they did not have in the first phase of democratic politics in India. As all the institutions which mediated between political power and the people have collapsed one after another, the institution of elections continues to be one of the few bridges available for political traffic. Consequently, all the political aspirations, demands and competing claims to power must be mediated through the mechanism of elections; the process and the outcome of elections are one of the few reliable indicators available to a student of politics today to read public opinion and to measure other changes in the larger environs of politics. Needless to say, elections are not a mirror of political reality. As a representational device, elections are better compared to a camera: in a sense it merely records what is 'out there', but it all depends on who holds it, in which direction and with what focus. Like aesthetic representation, mechanisms of selectivity, erasure and highlighting are inevitably at work in political representation. And what is more, like a camera, elections go much beyond recording the political reality; in a way, they create a reality of their own in that life is led for the sake of representation. Something of that is true of contemporary India, thanks to the new role elections have come to play in political life. The outcome of the state assembly elections, 1993-95, can be used to trace the outlines of a new phase in democratic politics, provided we view it in a framework sensitive to the complexities of the relationship between elections and politics."

#### SECOND DEMOCRATIC UPSURGE?

The beginning of a new phase in democratic politics is often marked by a spurt in political participation and the intensification of the citizen's involvement in politics. In the case of the elections under discussion however, higher participation and more intense politicisation points to much more than a change in political season: it

attests to some of the deeper continuities in India's democratic career. Here is evidence that the democratic revolution inaugurated on the basis of universal adult franchise more than four decades ago is still on, that the mechanism of competitive politics still retains its dynamism and its capacity to draw out newer sectors and sections in a society which has historically lacked a political centre, that notwithstanding the media folklore of an apathetic, indifferent and apolitical public, politicisation continues to be a defining feature of the constitution of public arena in contemporary India, and that a continuously expanding circle of participants in politics, rather than a progressively radical political agenda, continues to be the predominant mode of democratisation today.

At the same time this trend also serves to remind us of some of the discontinuities and the resultant dilemmas and dangers confronting democratisation. While there is undoubtedly something to celebrate about greater electoral participation, the enthusiasm needs to be moderated by the recognition that over the years, electoral participation has come to stand for political participation in a way it never did before, that the increasing salience attached to the act of voting as the privileged symbol or the defining moment of citizenship is not unrelated to a slide towards its becoming a momentary symbol, and that the crowding of the arena of electoral contestation is at least partly due to the shrinking institutional space for non-electoral modes of efficacious political activity.

First, a look at gross figures at the aggregate level. It is, of course, easy to over-read into figures, but for students of Indian politics this professional hazard is less of a danger at the moment than the ridiculous fate of missing altogether the simple message of some basic data which stare in their face. Time scribes data of voters' turnout and the number of candidates in state assembly

elections over the last four decades presented in Table I clearly show an upward secular trend. In both these respects the 1993-95 elections represent a new peak. Although the 60 per cent turnout mark was crossed as early as in 1967, the average turnout in all the major rounds of assembly elections (involving elections in at least 2,000 assembly constituencies) hovered around 60 per cent with the exception of post-Janata disillusionment when it touched 54 per cent. An average of more than 64 per cent in this election indicates a decisive break with that somewhat stagnant level. It means an increase of 4 per cent over the previous round of assembly elections held in 1989-90, not to mention a sizeable 9 per cent increase over the 1991 Lok Sabha elections. The number of candidates has risen more steadily over the decades, though here again there is a marked acceleration in the 1990s. Beginning with a flat decadal growth rate of about one candidate per constituency, reflecting a steady intensification of electoral contests, it starts jumping by leaps and bounds around the mid-1980s. The 1993-95 rounds have continued this upward trend in the number of contestants, taking it past 14 per seat, and a larger share of independents in it. If the 1960s were characterised by the first democratic upsurge, the 1990s are witnessing the second democratic upsurge in post-independence India.

At a disaggregate level, however, the deceptive simplicity of this picture gives way to complex and difficult questions about the meanings embedded in this upsurge. A glance through Table 2, which presents the turnout figures at the state level over the last three assembly elections, brings out various aspects of a complex picture. First of all the increase in participation is quite widespread without being uniform. Except a very marginal fall in Bihar which had already experienced a significant increase in the previous elections, every state registered a

TABLE I: PARTICIPATION TRENDS IN MAJOR ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1952-1995

Year of Election	States	Total Seats	Turnout (Per Cent)	Total Contestants	Contestants Per Seat	
					Total	Independents
1952	22	3283	45	15361	4.7	1.9
1957	13	2906	48	10176	3.5	1.4
1960-62	15	3196	58	13665	4.3	1.3
1967	20	3487	61	16507	4.7	1.9
1971-72	21	3131	60	13768	4.4	1.6
1977-78	24	3723	59	22396	6.0	2.2
1979-80	16	2589	54	17826	6.9	3.2
1984-85	18	3131	58	26963	8.6	5.4
1989-90	18	3028	60	35187	11.6	7.0
1993-95	16	2770	64	40773	14.7	9.1

Note: A 'major' round of assembly elections is defined here as one which involved, within a year or two, elections to at least 2,000 assembly constituencies.

Source: Up to 1979-80, from V B Singh and Shankar Bose, *State Elections in India: Data Handbook on Vidhan Sabha Elections, 1952-85* (Vol 1), Sage, New Delhi, 1987, p 14; the rest compiled by CSIS Data Unit.

noticeably higher turnout. Every state has its own pace and timing, but their trajectories do not appear to be moving in different directions. This round of elections saw Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and, of course, Uttar Pradesh 'catch up' with the participation rate in the rest of the country; consequently, they contributed much more to the average growth rate of 4 per cent than the rest.

Once we turn to accounting for the observed variations in turnout, the limitations of some of the obvious hypotheses and data available to us become clear. Neither the level of turnout reached in different states in this election nor the differential rate of increase in turnout lends itself to a neat explanation. If the rise to power of a new political force representing a new social constituency explains the massive mobilisation in Maharashtra. Uttar Pradesh and Sikkim, it doesn't quite apply to the routine alternation in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The closely contested nature of elections may account for higher mobilisation in Orissa, but Rajasthan did not experience it under similar conditions. Besides, the completely one-sided verdicts in Himachal and Andhra recorded a similarly high level of electoral participation. Something of the intensity which struggles over extension of suffrage have historically generated, can be found in today's India in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh along with Sikkim in a manifest form. Perhaps the same process is at work in a latent manner in the rest of India barring the southern states where the political rise of backward castes has already been accomplished. It may be hypothesised therefore that the fundamental force which has given rise to the second democratic upsurge is the enfranchisement of the backward castes. One must hasten to add that this process of enfranchisement takes different political routes in different states; it is not just that the logic has worked itself out to varying stages in different states but that different states have a somewhat autonomous logic, depending upon the specificity of their political configuration.

In the absence of longitudinal survey data on patterns of individual participation by social background, it is difficult to verify this understanding. But a quick examination of the intrastate variations in turnout partly supports it. Practically everywhere rural constituencies report a higher turnout (8, 10 and 17 per cent higher in Gujarat, UP and Maharashtra, respectively) than urban constituencies. The popular impression of a higher Muslim turnout is not borne out by an examination of turnout in constituencies with higher concentration of Muslim votes. The reserved (SC) constituencies generally

recorded a lower turnout than the rest, but it need not reflect patterns of dalit participation; in all probability it is an outcome of the lower intensity and enthusiasm of non-dalit voters in these constituencies. On the other hand, the reserved (ST) constituencies, which are invariably areas with concentration of tribal population, recorded higher than average turnout in Andhra, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Some backward regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada in Maharashtra, east Delhi and Bundelkhand in UP recorded a higher than average turnout. But the evidence on this score is equivocal. Other backward regions like Vindhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in MP and Poorvanchal in UP reported lower turnout; Telengana in AP and western Orissa reported average turnout. In sum, it is not just backwardness but its effective politicisation or otherwise which seems to make the crucial difference. This, rather mixed evidence, is insufficient to support the hypothesis about the relationship between the enfranchisement of backward castes and the rise in turnout. What it does reaffirm is India's difference from the stereotypical western models of political participation, and that India's path to democratisation lies through an effective politicisation of peripheries, both spatial and social.

The disaggregated figures on the number of candidates per constituency by states (Table 3) are relatively easy to explain, partly because the level of differentiation is much higher in this case than in turnout. Here again, the general tendency is towards greater number of candidates with the passage of time. But the rate of growth and the

current level vary from state to state, depending mainly on the party system. Arunachal Pradesh still exhibits the low and stagnant level associated with one-party dominance. States which have reached or are close to a two-party system occupy the middle ground with an average of a little over 10 candidates. The general trend is toward a higher number, though a consolidation of two-party system in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh was accompanied by a reduction in the number of contestants in the 1993 elections. The fragmented party systems of UP and Bihar stand out as exceptions

TABLE 3: CONTESTANTS PER SEAT IN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1984-95

States	1984-85	1989-90	1993-95
Andhra Pradesh	6.7	5.7	10.9
Arunachal Pradesh	3.8	2.8	2.9
Bihar	13.0	20.0	24.9
Delhi	-	-	18.8
Gujarat	6.2	10.3	13.9
Goa	8.0	6.3	7.7
Himachal Pradesh	4.3	6.6	6.1
Karnataka	8.0	9.1	11.1
Madhya Pradesh	7.6	13.1	11.4
Manipur	6.0	4.1	5.6
Maharashtra	7.7	13.0	16.4
Mizoram	4.5	4.0	3.0
Orissa	5.4	6.2	9.6
Rajasthan	7.5	15.4	12.1
Sikkim	6.0	3.6	5.8
Uttar Pradesh	14.0	14.4	23.0
Total	8.6	11.7	14.7

Notes: 1 Delhi did not have assembly elections during 1984-85 and 1989-90.  
2 The number of contestants per seat in Uttar Pradesh assembly election, 1991, was 18.5.

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE TURNOUT IN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1984-95

States	1984-85	1989-90	1993-95	Increase
Andhra Pradesh	66.7	67.6	71.1	3.5
Arunachal Pradesh	76.3	68.9	81.4	12.3
Bihar	55.1	62.2	61.8	-0.4
Delhi	55.6	54.3	61.8	-
Gujarat	47.7	51.1	64.7	13.6
Goa	71.9	68.7	71.7	3.0
Himachal Pradesh	69.6	66.7	71.7	5.0
Karnataka	66.3	63.8	68.8	5.0
Madhya Pradesh	48.6	52.8	59.0	6.2
Manipur	87.3	80.6	88.8	8.2
Maharashtra	58.3	61.1	72.0	10.9
Mizoram	70.6	80.4	80.8	0.4
Orissa	51.4	55.5	73.8	18.3
Rajasthan	54.0	56.5	60.6	4.1
Sikkim	62.6	69.5	81.0	11.5
Uttar Pradesh	44.8	48.5	57.1	8.6
Total	55.3	60.3	64.2	3.9

Notes: 1 Table entries in the last column are for percentage increase in turnout in the 1993-95 assembly election as compared to the previous assembly election in 1989-90.

2 Table entries for 1984 and 1989 in the case of Delhi are for turnout in Lok Sabha elections; Delhi did not have an assembly then.

3 Turnout in the 1991 election to UP assembly was 47.1 per cent.

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

and largely account for the two outliers with an average of 23 and 249 candidates per-constituency, respectively, which considerably affect the national average. Besides party fragmentation, the entry of the OBCs on the centre-stage of politics also contributes to the sudden rise in the number of contestants.

Making sense of higher electoral participation in this new phase of democratic politics remains an intellectual challenge which students of Indian politics are yet to take up. It would take considerable research effort, both quantitative and qualitative, to explain the overall trend and its internal variations. The preliminary observations offered here are by way of drawing attention to this phenomenon. What needs much more attention though, than simply analysing the figures, is the question of significance of this trend for the polity. That is directly related to the terrain *at* meanings embedded in the act of participation, electoral or otherwise, which calls for political research informed by anthropological techniques.

But some points can be made straight away. First, electoral participation reflects more enthusiasm and involvement in the polity on the part of the common citizen than the English press and its academics would have us believe. Second, the degree of intensity varies from state to state, depending upon the range of political choices which confront the electorate. A higher turnout in Orissa does not necessarily mean a more intense involvement than, say, Bihar. A better predictor of the level of involvement, thirdly, is the social community. Political participation is still mediated by communitarian identities and reflects something of the cleavage between the mobilised and the hitherto unincorporated communities. The contestation for power between these two types of communities in the electoral arena continuously draw citizens' deeper sense of the self in the act of political participation. For the millions of slum- and unauthorised colony-dwellers in Delhi, sections of dalits and Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, OBCs in Bihar and, to some extent, in Maharashtra and Sikkim, it was not an ordinary election this time; at stake were not just their material interests but their identity and dignity and, in some cases, their very existence.

Fourth, while greater participation and involvement does indicate a higher level of politicisation, it does not necessarily mean a corresponding increase in the citizen's commitment to and trust in the political order. The simultaneity of involvement and alienation which has characterised the Indian electorate<sup>1</sup> has been further accentuated in the 1990s. And, what is more, this alienation

does not result from traditional cynicism towards governmental authority [contra Eldersveld and Ahmed]; it is firmly, rooted in the experience of post-independence politics. Finally, it is now clear that it does not make sense to read the meanings involved in electoral participation through the tradition/modernity dichotomy. Greater participation is definitely not a sign of modernisation, for its reasons are anything but modern. Nor is it by any means a traditional response. The state assembly elections have taken the Indian polity a step further in the effective incorporation of the modern ideas, ideals and institutions of democratic politics in a non-European setting.

The consequences of this upsurge in participation for the process of democratisation need to be understood in their complexity. Surely, greater participation is good news for the vitality of the processes of democratisation: it does show that these processes still retain their dynamic capacity to mobilise citizens, especially the hitherto unincorporated sections. By drawing more people and politicising them, the electoral mechanism does provide a base for radicalisation of democracy; it also creates necessary though insufficient conditions for the forging of political cleavages which cut across social cleavages and thus contribute to democratic consolidation.

However, participation in a democratic process does not by itself lead towards participatory democracy. It all depends on what kinds of meanings the new participants bring with them and whether this influx can be institutionalised. In this respect the signals from the assembly elections 1993-95 seem ambivalent. Since the participatory urge in this instance arose mainly out of partisan allegiance, it may not result in a higher level of support for the democratic order. Especially in the case of new entrants, the act of participation is inextricably tied to specific expectations. More often than not, these expectations are linked to cultural codes which do not jell with the norms of the existing democratic institutions. Consequently, the recent participatory upsurge can further intensify the serious problem of institutional consolidation of democracy. In this sense the second democratic upsurge throws up a challenge to the future of democratisation—a challenge arising not from the failure of democratic enterprise to take off, but from its continuous, if partial, success.

#### ELECTORAL VOLATILITY OR TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS?

The most visible outcome of the assembly elections 1993-95 is the large-scale change

in governments at the state level. With the minor exceptions of Arunachal Pradesh, Goa and Rajasthan and the major exception of Bihar, all the states witnessed the defeat of the ruling party at the polls. 'Vote against incumbent' by an angry, volatile electorate suggests itself as an explanation for the outcome. Even Goa and Rajasthan do not appear to be serious exceptions, for the ruling parties nearly lost the elections; at any rate a massive turnover of elites characterised these cases of governmental stability. It would seem, therefore, that Indian politics has reached a critical phase characterised by an increasingly volatile electorate and a party system in advanced stages of decomposition.

The statewise figures of Pedersen's Volatility index in the last three elections reported in Table 4 provide some reason to qualify such an alarming picture. On an average, the aggregate vote swing between 1993-95 assembly elections and the previous elections held mostly in 1989-90 revolves around 15 per cent. Compared to western democracies, where the process of binding-

TABLE 4: VOLATILITY IN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1980-1995

States	1980-85	1985-90	1990-95
Andhra Pradesh	4.2	12.6	13.9
Arunachal Pradesh	30.5	28.5	15.6
Bihar	13.1	24.9	15.4
Gujarat	6.0	43.7	26.8
Goa	58.3	24.6	19.5
Himachal Pradesh	13.3	23.1	15.1
Karnataka	11.4	35.3	24.0
Madhya Pradesh	6.0	20.1	11.6
Manipur	27.2	48.5	13.1
Maharashtra	9.5	34.4	13.9
Mizoram	20.5	37.1	11.2
Orissa	31.0	54.9	24.6
Rajasthan	9.3	19.6	18.1
Sikkim	63.7	16.6	44.2
Uttar Pradesh	12.1	21.9	10.8
Total	21.0	29.7	18.5

- Notes: 1 Table entries are for Pedersen's Volatility Index. This simple measure of aggregate volatility is the sum of cumulative per cent gains in vote share of all the parties which have improved their performance as compared to the previous elections, plus the vote share of new parties, if any. The three columns present the scores for 1984-85, 1989-90 and 1993-95 assembly elections respectively as compared to the previous election in that state.
- 2 Table entry for Uttar Pradesh in the third column stands for 1991-93; the relevant score for 1989-91 is 32.5.
- 3 Average stands here for simple mean and is therefore subject to undue influence of extreme values of very small states like Goa and Sikkim.

Source: Computed from data at CSDS Data Unit.

in-over-long-time of partisan loyalties has resulted in crystallisation of party system, the level of volatility is bound to appear rather high.<sup>1</sup> However, the experience of four decades of electoral politics in India is enough to demonstrate the inappropriateness of this yardstick which cannot but discover India in a state of perpetual pre-alignment. It may be analytically more rewarding to give up this teleological expectation in favour of a model which takes continuous volatility as the structural attribute of competitive politics in the Indian context. Electoral volatility is but another name for a continuously open-ended negotiation by the citizens with the organised vehicles of politics. The stubborn refusal of the Indian voter to live up to models of 'political learning' by developing rigid partisan loyalties is not just a potential malady; it is also the potential source of transformative politics.

Viewed in this light, the level of electoral volatility in the recent assembly elections is neither very high nor alarming. What is distinctive about the 1993-95 assembly elections, in fact, is a reduction in electoral volatility and the stabilisation of its pattern. Except for Sikkim and Andhra Pradesh, the level of aggregate volatility between 1980-90 and 1993-95 is lower than between 1985 and 1989-90 in all the states which went to polls this time. The swing between 1980 to 1985 was much lower in several cases, but the pattern of 1993-95 is more evenly spread across different states. If it is useful to mark significant electoral shifts in India with the label 'critical elections', the assembly elections of 1989-90 are surely a better candidate for it than those of 1993-95. The turn of the decade brought in a new political configuration in much of the Hindi heartland and western India. The long-term effect of the recent assembly elections would be to consolidate the trend, modify its direction and translate it into a new pattern of government control.

Since the aggregate measure employed here does not permit any robust inference about individual or sectional volatility, the implications of this phenomenon for the future of democratisation remain less than clear. It is possible, on the one hand, that the moderate level of aggregate volatility conceals a massive vote switching by citizens and communities. On the other hand, the available indirect evidence about India's recent electoral past suggests that the volatility is much less than it appears, since much of it is accounted for by the young and the newly mobilised voters opting for the party of change. On current evidence, there are very few reasons to believe that the aggregate figures are completely off the

mark in measuring vote-switching. Nor does a shift in voting habit appear to be a fickle decision for the Indian voter. Over the years, the proportion of sophisticated voting has registered an increase. To that extent the phenomenon of electoral volatility continues to carry the seeds of transformative politics, notwithstanding the complete non-realisation of this possibility today.

#### POST-CONGRESS POLITY?

Whether the possibilities of transformative politics opened by the democratic upsurge and electoral volatility get realised would depend upon how these changes are processed through the apparatus of organised politics, namely, political parties. In this respect the assembly elections of 1993-95 have ushered in a new era in Indian politics. These elections mark the beginning of the third phase in the reconfiguration of the pattern of party competition or, to use the old fashioned jargon, the party system.

The first phase of the famous 'Congress system' characterised by single-party dominance, lasted the first two decades after independence. It was the big Congress vs small and fragmented forces of the opposition at the state as well as the national level. Congress successfully defied Duverger's law - which expected a two-party system to emerge in a plurality electoral system - by incorporating political competition and consociational arrangements within its boundaries and yet holding it together through a delicate management of factions. The second phase, let us call it the 'Congress-Opposition system', was still characterised by one-party salience though no longer dominance, of the Congress. Beginning of the plebiscitary mode of electoral politics saw the emergence of genuine competition to the Congress, both at the state and at the national level, often aided by electoral waves. Despite remaining out of power very often, the Congress retained a salience in the party system not only because it continued to command greater popular support than any opposition party, but also because it was the core around which the party system was structured. This phase saw the emergence of bipolar consolidation in various states without yielding a bipolarity at the national level. This system of 'multiple bipolarities' was structured in such a way that Congress was the only common factor across different patterns of bipolarity in different states.

The third phase inaugurated by the state assembly elections 1993-95 has decisively brought to an end the dominant multi-party system of the previous era. It definitely signals a move towards a competitive multi-party system which can no longer be defined

with reference to the Congress. It may as yet be too early to expect a fully worked out picture of what the post-Congress system would look like. However, some of its features may be noted with reference to the recent assembly elections.

First, it marks the near-completion of the process of bipolar consolidation all over the country. Most of the southern and the eastern states had already entered the era of two-party competitions. These elections extended it to Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Sikkim, either by eliminating the minor forces in a hitherto multi-party system, or by throwing up a second party in a hitherto single-party dominant system. These elections were also marked by an intensification of political competition among the leading parties, whether in bipolar or multipolar competitions. It must be added, however, that the move towards bipolarity is never fully realised. There is a tendency, witnessed for instance in Andhra Pradesh, for the two leading parties to slip back somewhat in terms of the space they jointly occupied. In this sense, state politics in India is likely to both promise and frustrate the realisation of Duverger's law.

The data presented in Table 5 shows the rather high level of fractionalisation in most of the states despite the bipolar consolidation. States like Bihar, Manipur and Uttar Pradesh

TABLE 5: PARTY FRACTIONALISATION IN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1985-1995

States	1984-85	1989-90	1993-95
Andhra Pradesh	.644	.641	.691
Arunachal Pradesh	-	.698	.716
Bihar	.804	.851	.869
Delhi	-	-	.674
Goa	-	.684	.843
Gujarat	.631	.746	.711
Himachal Pradesh	.598	.678	.630
Karnataka	.639	.707	.777
Madhya Pradesh	.652	.724	.677
Maharashtra	.768	.801	.855
Manipur	-	.790	.825
Mizoram	.835	-	.726
Orissa	.643	.621	.712
Rajasthan	.721	.777	.699
Sikkim	.555	.476	.677
Uttar Pradesh	.789	.810	.807

Notes: 1 Table entries are for Rae's Fractionalisation Index measured by summing the square of decimal vote share of each party and then subtracting the value obtained by 1. The closer the scores are to 1.0, the higher the party fractionalisation and vice versa. Since this index does not recognise party alliances, it shows higher fractionalisation than exists at ground in a state like Maharashtra.

2 Blank entries are for states where there was no assembly election or the data is not available.

Source: Computed from data at CSDS Data Unit.

fall in the category of multi-party systems tending towards atomisation. The entry of BJP in Karnataka and SDF in Sikkim has contributed to a sudden jump in fractionalisation score, while Orissa has experienced it without any new entrant. Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Himachal, MP, Rajasthan and Sikkim continue to be comfortably bipolar.

Second, the outcome of these elections makes the consolidation of bipolarity at the state level to add up to any thing like a two-party system at the national level more improbable than ever before. The multiple bipolarity in the previous phase at least had Congress as a common factor. The assembly elections of 1993-95 have removed even that. With the affective marginalisation of the Congress from the real arena of electoral competition in UP and Bihar, the two largest states, these elections have begun an apparently irreversible process of the reconfiguration of party system. To be sure, it continues to be a case of multiple bipolarities, i e, the existence of two-party systems at the state level, the diversity of which collates to give the appearance of a multi-party system at the national level. It is more fragmented than before, but it is not the kind of tractionalisation which is bound to result into atomisation.

Third, with the Congress gradually vacating the central position (both in the sense of occupying and defining the middle-ground and being most prominent) there is likely to be a vacuum in the party system at the national level it is becoming more and more difficult and slippery to occupy the middle space in national politics. The Congress could do so earlier by constantly negotiating with the median points of the various ideological and social cleavages which divide Indian society, in order to make them coincide. In the last decade or

so, the changes in the discursive terrain of these cleavages have resulted in the drifting apart of the various median points making it more difficult than ever before to forge a correspondence required to be located in the centre of emerging political configuration.

fourth, the decline of a dominant, centrist, catch-all party which retained its pre-eminence through cross-sectional mobilisation, had already started resulting in the rise of exclusivist parties with sectional political agendas. Situated on the peripheries of the party system, parties like the BSP are an outcome of the Congress's diminishing appeal across all sections of the society. Some of these may only prove 'flash parties' and might disappear as quickly as they emerged, but some of them are here to stay. Ironically, most of these political formations, which serve as instruments of democratisation of society in favour of the hitherto disenfranchised sections, are themselves completely undemocratic in their organisational set-up as well as style of functioning.

Finally, the above-mentioned features of the emerging configuration of party formations need to be viewed against the backdrop of the serious erosion of parties as organised vehicles of politics. The erosion is taking place from within as well as from without. There are indications that the well known collapse of the organisational structure of the Congress is being replicated in that of its rivals as a result of the very logic of occupying the middle ground of politics.

A near identification of parties with elections, their increasing inability to settle competing claims to power at the time of nominations, and their inability to maintain an organic relationship with the electorate are some of the tendencies which cut across the political spectrum today and have been

intensified in the recent past. This form of internal collapse contributes to and is in turn reinforced by the growing loss of legitimacy and trust in the parties among the citizens. Over the last decade or more, this intense dissatisfaction with political parties has taken the form of withdrawal among some sections of society, from the arena of electoral politics in favour of social and non-party political movements. The assembly elections of 1993-95 illustrated various consequences of this withdrawal ranging from middle class cynicism to attempts at forging a political alternative to the established political parties. None of the latter came anywhere close to crossing the minimum threshold of popular support required in the plurality system. However, its effects on the institutionalisation of the party system should not be overlooked- The Indian party system is undergoing institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation simultaneously. On the one hand, the reach of the parties has increased and their capacity to draw allegiance, expanded at the expense of non-party competitors. On the other hand, the depth or the intensity of the allegiance has been very sharply undermined, reducing the act of voting for parties to an instrumental moment.

Viewed in this perspective, the apparently messy and localised character of the electoral outcome of 1993-95 begins to make sense and the infinite details of the performance of various parties yield something of a pattern. The summary description of electoral outcome in all these states presented in Table 6 brings out some of the broader patterns.

It is a useful index, first of all, of the decline of the Congress. Notwithstanding its limited electoral success in those states, like Orissa, MP and Himachal where there was no other alternative to a very unpopular and

TABLE 6: VOTE SHARE BY PARTIES IN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1993-95

States	INC	BJP	JD	CPI	CPM	BSP	State Party 1	Votes	State Party 2	Votes	IND	OTH
Andhra Pradesh	32.3	3.8	0.1	2.8	2.2	1.3	TDP	42.2	-	-	6.3	9.0
Arunachal Pradesh	50.6	3.4	17.3	-	-	-	JP	2.5	-	-	26.2	0.0
Bihar	16.5	13.1	27.6	4.9	1.5	1.3	SP	6.8	JMMS	3.7	14.0	10.6
Delhi	34.4	42.8	12.7	0.2	0.4	1.9	SP	0.5	-	-	6.0	2.6
Gujarat	32.7	42.6	2.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	19.3	2.7
Goa	37.6	9.0	-	-	-	1.4	MGP	22.2	UGDP	8.3	14.0	7.5
Himachal Pradesh	49.4	36.1	1.1	1.1	0.8	2.2	-	-	-	-	8.2	3.3
Karnataka	27.3	16.7	33.2	0.2	0.5	1.0	KCP	7.1	KRRS	2.4	7.0	4.4
Madhya Pradesh	40.7	38.8	3.9	1.0	0.3	6.8	SP	0.6	-	-	5.9	4.3
Manipur	30.1	3.7	12.1	5.6	0.2	-	MPP	23.7	FPM	6.1	5.1	13.4
Maharashtra	31.0	12.8	6.0	0.3	0.9	1.4	SHS	16.6	BRP	2.9	22.0	6.1
Mizoram	33.1	3.1	-	-	-	-	MNF	40.4	-	-	4.4	-
Orissa	39.4	7.9	35.4	1.7	0.7	0.5	JMM	2.0	SJP	1.4	19.1	0.9
Rajasthan	38.7	38.6	6.9	0.2	1.0	0.4	SP	0.1	-	-	12.9	5.2
Sikkim	15.0	0.2	-	-	0.2	-	SDF	42.0	SSP	35.2	5.9	1.5
Uttar Pradesh	15.1	33.3	12.3	0.6	0.5	10.7	SP	18.1	-	-	6.9	9.5
Total	28.3	22.5	13.1	1.5	1.0	-	-	-	-	-	9.0	-

Source: Data available at CSDS Data Unit, based on constituencywise election results released by the chief election officer of the concerned states.

arbitrary regime, the electoral outcome has only confirmed the suspicion that a long-term decline of the Congress has begun. Its performance in these elections cannot be described merely as a series of electoral defeats; there are several reasons to believe that what the Congress faces is a deep and enduring erosion in its support base. To begin with the most obvious, not only did the Congress lose power in many states, it has been relegated to the rank of the third party in the assemblies of UP, Bihar and Karnataka. At least in UP and Bihar the Congress may not count any more in deciding the way electoral battle lines are drawn. Secondly, its share of popular vote has suffered a serious erosion. Taking all the 16 states into account, its vote share fails to touch the 30 per cent mark. In aggregate terms it means a decline of 7 per cent votes as compared to Congress votes in these states in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections. Even after allowing for the usual fragmentation of votes of a national party in the assembly elections, the swing is of a serious order. In Bihar and U P its vote share has fallen well below the 20 percent mark and in Karnataka and Sikkim below the 30 per cent mark. In these states, the Congress stands on the receiving end of the logic of plurality system which might further hasten its decline. The third evidence of Congress decline comes from the fall in the Congress's success in retaining its own seats. This fall has taken place even in a state like Madhya Pradesh where the Congress otherwise did well in the elections.

Apart from statistics of electoral outcome, there is a lot more to substantiate the hypothesis about the decline of the Congress. An average Congress vote is more 'shallow' than before in that it is not backed by a deep conviction or loyalty; quite often it is a reluctant vote open to shift in near future. Besides, the erosion of support for the Congress among the Muslims is quite evident by now. The available evidence from academic surveys in Bihar and Maharashtra substantiates the view that given an effective choice (and in some cases even in its absence) the Muslim voters would rather choose any party but the Congress. The evidence about tribal and dalit vote is still unclear. The popular impression tends to underestimate the resilience of the Congress among these marginal sections.

These elections also demonstrated the Congress's loss of institutionalised will to power which had characterised its days of dominance in Indian politics. Consequently it has lost the drive even to win the elections. Its failure to subordinate familial considerations to winnability at the time of selection of candidates, its meek acceptance

of institutionalised rebellion and its failure to manage factions are various manifestations of the loss of institutionalised will to power (not to be confused with personal ambitions). Though it is difficult to predict the trajectory of Congress decline in the short run, it is absolutely clear that the Congress would do much worse in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections than it did in 1991. With some risk, it can also be predicted that the Congress is headed for its lowest ever vote share in any general election to Lok Sabha. What remains to be seen is how its votes translate in terms of parliamentary seats. As far as the medium and the long run is concerned, there does not seem to be much hope for the Congress. Short of miraculous reinvention, there is no way the existing Congress can serve as a vehicle for the enfranchisement of backward castes or the recent democratic upsurge. A failure in this respect spells doom for a party in the times to come. It is not that the Congress will disappear overnight or that it will disappear at all; but it may turn into just another party, one among many.

Such a possibility immediately raises the question of alternatives. The electoral outcome of 1993-95 does throw some light on popular support of various non-Congress parties, though it is too early to talk about their long-term prospects. Of these, the BJP's performance has been watched most keenly and has aroused some controversy, not because the evidence is equivocal but because the interpreters are narrowly partisan. On balance it is clear that although the BJP's apparently inevitable march to power has slowed down and has suffered many upsets, it has not quite been reversed. During the 1993-95 elections the BJP has consolidated its dramatic gains in 1989 and 1991 parliamentary elections, despite a marginal loss of one percent between 1991 and 1993-95 in these states. With the benefit of hindsight, it is better to see the BJP's defeat in Himachal, MP and UP as pointers to the limits of non-political route to power rather than a final rejection of the BJP.

Currently BJP shows many signs of a party on the rise. In the course of 1993-95 elections it spread out to newer areas (north Rajasthan, west UP, Marathwada and south Gujarat, to mention a few), newer segments of society (Sikhs in Delhi, OBCs in UP and Maharashtra, tribals in Gujarat and Rajasthan) and strengthened its support base among the youth. In the short-term future, the BJP is likely to make further gains within the limits set by the absence of its effective political reach in the coastal belt from Kerala to West Bengal. But its coming to power at the centre would be conditional upon its overcoming this limitation and thus converting a large number of its potential

supporters into actual voters. It also needs to successfully internalise the social cleavages of Indian society and transform its organisation significantly to channelise the recent democratic upsurge. These are difficult tasks. The political developments of the last year have shown that despite possessing an institutionalised political ambition, the BJP has not found it easy to handle caste cleavages.

The gap between 'demand' and 'supply' side of politics is most evident in the case of political formations vying to be the "third force" in the electoral arena. Paradoxically, although social constituency of the third force has expanded due to the recent democratic upsurge, the electoral support for its leading party, the Janata Dal, has sharply dwindled. The results of assembly elections held during 1993-95 confirm the trend which had already emerged in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections. Unlike the BJP, the JD has failed to consolidate its nationwide gains of 1989-90 and has managed to survive only in a few regional pockets. However, in those pockets it has not lost very much since 1991. While a good deal of JD's failure to make use of the historic opportunity of 1989 must be accounted for by its organisational and leadership failure to put together a credible party, there is perhaps more to it. Perhaps the newly enfranchised constituency of the marginal social groups is not yet amenable to macro political appeals. They are drawn into the arena of competitive politics via partisan allegiance to issues and organisations which are primarily local or at best regional in character. That makes it structurally more difficult for a single political party to effectively represent this emerging social constituency; regional political formations are the most likely carriers of democratic upsurge in this new phase of democratic politics. In this perspective it is easy to see why the Janata Dal has survived only in those states where it functions, for all practical purposes, as a regional political party which has its own identity, leadership and nearly independent ideology. The project of building a viable and credible political force which may occupy the third space in Indian politics is going to be crucial for institutionalising the second democratic upsurge witnessed in the recent elections.

The failure of the Janata Dal illustrates how difficult it is to occupy the middle ground in the national politics which is now being vacated by the Congress. The legacy of the national movement enabled the Congress to occupy and define the middle ground of various ideological and social cleavages. The resultant enduring loyalties of a cross-section of the electorate to the Congress ensured its electoral success. Any

new political formation without such an historical advantage finds this ground too slippery now. If it tries to catch all, it loses any distinctiveness and thus ends up catching none. If, on the other hand, it tries to acquire and maintain distinctiveness, it ends up being exclusivist and loses its capacity for cross sectional mobilisation. The political extinction faced by Janata Dal in most parts of the country is directly related to this dilemma. It also explains some of the problems which confront BJP today.

The absence of a straight path to the occupation of middle ground has encouraged enterprising political actors to force their entry through different routes. Of these, the two which yielded electoral returns involved the forging of a 'master cleavage'. The BJP worked on the master cleavage of Hindus vs Others with the help of a sustained communal propaganda and followed it up with routine political work in local terms. The electoral outcome shows that Hindu consolidation is bound to be temporary and fragile, open to other cross-cutting cleavages. Laloo Yadav's strategy in Bihar aimed at another master cleavage: high caste vs low caste, backed up by symbolically charged theatre of empowerment. He reaped the electoral harvest as BJP did in some states following the rath yatra. It is not clear if his attempt at creating dalit-Muslim~OBC combine would have a longer lease of life than the BJP's attempt at Hindu consolidation. Apart from problems of longevity, both these routes to the centre of politics suffer from inherent limitations from the vantage point of radical democracy.

#### WHITHER DEMOCRATISATION?

This preliminary sketch of the picture of Indian politics as seen from the window of election must also notice, however fleetingly, some of the larger processes which constitute a background to the more obvious movement of parties and leaders. A comparison of the snapshot of 1993-95 elections with the elections of the previous phase of Indian politics brings out some of the enduring structural changes which have silently redefined the terrain of electoral politics. Three of these changes need to be foregrounded here; one, the simultaneous regionalisation and homogenisation of the political terrain; two, new forms of political articulation and invention of social cleavages; and three, the changing terms of political discourse. All three changes directly bear upon the long-term prospects of democratisation.

In a sense the most significant outcome of these elections is the lack of a neat pattern which cuts across different states. It brings

into sharp relief the regionalisation of Indian polity at the end of two decades of plebiscitary politics at the national level. A comparison with any of the previous 'national' rounds of assembly elections- 1971-72, 1977-78, 1979-80, 1984-85 or even 1989-90- suggests a sharp contrast. In each of these earlier rounds there was a clear nationwide verdict: one-party coalitions swept across states, barring exceptions. At the end of the 1993-95 rounds of assembly elections, the political way of India is more variegated than even before. The number and the ideological range of political formations which have a share in the cake of state power is unprecedented in post-independence India.

Thus, these elections have quietly accomplished what the parliamentary elections of 1989 and 1991 could not fully do, namely, to put an end to the age of nationwide electoral waves. This era, which began with the parliamentary elections of 1971, was characterised by a series of plebiscites which resulted in mobilisation for or against the Congress, which cut across special boundaries of constituencies, states and regions (with the partial exception of the north-south divide) and thus eliminated the local character of electoral contests. The latest verdict may not have quite restored the local character of elections but it did bring back the assembly elections to their original context, namely, state politics. From the horizon of a future historian one of the most noticeable outcomes in these elections is the rupturing of the 'Hindi heartland', the home-ground of electoral waves in the 1970s and 1980s. This region rarely saw any deviation from the direction of national waves; at the end of the 1993-95 round, the four largest states in this region were being governed by four rival political formations.

It is not as if the processes of integration and homogenisation which made electoral waves possible have been reversed. In fact, these elections did witness several waves in different states (Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat) or in different regions of the state (eastern LLP, north Bihar, Konkan and Bombay). The difference of course is that the direction of these waves varies from state to state. The locus and the operative level of the logic of electoral wave has shifted from that of the nation to the states. A state like Madhya Pradesh illustrates very well the extent to which processes of political integration have levelled intra-state differences in politicisation and party preferences. Thus this regionalisation should not be interpreted as the first step towards localisation of political competition; it may be more useful to see it as a typically Indian path to homogenisation. Unlike in

the west, this process would not obliterate all differences and create a mass society; there it would mean, paradoxically, first a segmentation and then effective homogenisation within that segment or sector while retaining and foregrounding differences *vis-a-vis* other sectors. These segments could be territorial or social, but the vehicle of their integration is in most cases competitive politics; no wonder, differences and conflicts are built into this model of sectoral homogenisation. There is no doubt that an effective regionalisation a polity of this size would strengthen the process of democratisation. However, it is possible to overstate this argument if one neglects the internal regimentation which accompanies it.

In a similar way, the second long term trend, namely, the new mode of political articulation of social cleavages also leaves ambiguous message for the future of democratisation. The most significant trend of the recent assembly elections in this respect was the acceleration of the delayed but inevitable rise of the OBCs to political power in north India. The process began in Bihar first of all, thanks to the legacy of socialist politics among the backward castes. This election did not merely continue this long-term process but would be remembered as a landmark in the political rise of OBCs. First, because it has expanded beyond the boundaries of Bihar into UP. Second, it put a stamp of inevitability and irreversibility on this trend by handing over decisive defeat to the most determined resistance to the rise of OBCs in the Bihar elections of 1995. Although currently the OBC politics in different states is very unevenly placed (if Bihar and UP define one end of the spectrum. Orissa and Rajasthan lie at the other end, apparently untouched by this wave), its extension to the remaining states is now a matter of time.

The Constitution and then the rise of OBCs as a political community are examples of how marginalised groups can make an unorthodox and unanticipated use of the levers of competitive politics to make place for themselves. Here is a living example of what Benedict Anderson had called 'imagined communities'. The expression 'OBCs' has indeed travelled a long way from a rather careless bureaucratic nomenclature in the document of the Constitution to a vibrant and subjectively experienced political community. It also confirms the continuing creative role of politics in articulating and, in the process, transforming social cleavages in contemporary India. Needless to say, as much of the contemporary social science has reminded us, the redrawing of social

cleavages takes place by forging new identities through shared narratives of the past and, sometimes, of the future.

This election also witnessed another, though less successful, route to the same end. Attempts at creating a social coalition of the marginalised sections of the arena of electoral politics were made not just in UP, Bihar and Maharashtra, but in a less visible form elsewhere too. The break-up of SP-BSP alliance and the disastrous performance of Bahujan Mahasangh serves to remind us that this coalition building is a very delicate and difficult operation, bordering on the impossible. And in the absence of an effective ideological chain of equivalence among these sectional concerns, the resultant coalition can produce at best stapled identities which can come apart very easily.

The other major development in this respect was the realignment of the Muslim community following the destruction of the Babri masjid. It will take some more time, perhaps a few more elections for the new pattern to settle down, but it is clear that there has been considerable disenchantment with the established leadership and the Congress Party among the Muslims all over the country. Although its dissatisfaction is not yet captured by a new political formation, it is clear that the early fears of Muslims being forced into exclusivist politics were exaggerated. In the long run, the event of December 6 may have given the various communities which happen to profess Islam a new supra-local Muslim identity.

This development parallels the emergence of supra-local caste identities in the recent elections. Increasingly, the caste is not a local consideration which works in favour of a candidate of one's own caste. Now caste identities and affiliations are imagined at the level of the state. The disengagement of caste from its localised context is but another manifestation of sectoral homogenisation discussed above.

On balance, then, the consequences of a new casteism are likely to strengthen the process of democratisation. At the same time it needs to be remembered that in the absence of political mediation of sectional claims characteristics of the Congress system, the over-all effect may not be as benevolent as one might expect. If the experiments at coalition-making continue to fail, it is likely that the newly acquired identities will get hardened and would consequently be less open to political negotiations. In this respect India is gradually ceasing to be an exception to the social cleavage theory of party system which expects political parties to form strictly along the demographic fault-line in multi-ethnic societies. It is not that the demographic, cultural and political expressions of social

cleavages have come to coincide in India. But we have taken some steps in that direction in the last few years.

Finally, a look at the world of ideas or the ideological field as reflected in the mirror of the state assembly elections. The last few years have witnessed a sea-change in the terms of political discourse. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the cold war, the triumphant entry of globalisation and liberalisation and the rise of communalism have significantly reshaped the concerns, issues and positions in the elite discourse on Indian politics. These elections provided an occasion to find out if some of these changes have been reflected in popular discourse as well. Is there a significant value-change underlying the recent political reconfiguration? Have the recent issues successfully drawn new ideological cleavages which cut across the old ideological lines, or have they been absorbed by the latter? Are we witnessing an intensification of ideological polarities?

It is easier to answer these questions with reference to the production end of the ideological field than its reception. The changes affected by various political formations in their ideological postures are rather well known. They basically involve the redeployment of the nationalist vocabulary for newer ends. Behind the usual rhetoric of opposition, practically all the major political formations agreed to shift the political agenda to the right as understood in the old left-right ideological continuum. Acceptance of unrestricted entry of foreign firms, retreat not only from a regime of controls, but also from social welfare programmes, tacit acceptance that the majority will prevail in communal disputes, acceptance of 'tough' policy on Kashmir - all these have come to constitute the national consensus across political divisions. Very few politics can claim to have made the transition from the old to the new world with so little discursive contestation. The amazing ease with which the old rhetoric of socialism has given way to the new lingo of global capitalism is not only a comment on how thin the old ideology had worn, but also on how defenceless India's political establishment is in the face of the latest from the west. These elections also provided an instance of the resilience of the political processes and their capacity to absorb sharp ideological polarities such as the dispute around reservations.

Any generalisation about the reception of political ideas in the register of popular sensibilities can at best be suggestive in the absence of any serious research on this aspect of Indian politics. On the face of it, it does not seem that anything like an ideological

polarity has emerged in the structure of popular political beliefs. Rather, ideological cleavages in the public arena do not get articulated as opposite opinions on shared issues and concerns. In India ideological polarity takes the form of mutually exclusive discursive fields rooted in social cleavages. Often defined by the master cleavage of English versus the vernacular and further subdivided by social hierarchy, these different ideological communities are characterised by very low internal polarisation and a higher polarisation across the discursive boundaries. More often than not, ideological polarisation is rooted in incomprehensibility of different actors situated in different circles of intelligibility. What appears as an ideological difference is mostly a function of social origins, for ideas do not disseminate in a social vacuum. They travel along established trails which closely follow sociological fault-lines. That is why higher ideological issues are not accessible to the subalterns. Even if they are, they are clothed in local costumes and are inevitably received through the lenses of local partisanship. This is what accounts for the differential response to issues like Mandal and Mandir, not to speak of even more remote ones like the New Economic Policy or the Uniform Civil Code from the localised registers of popular sensibility.

The problem of radical incomprehension is not confined to subaltern reception of elite ideologies; this logic also works the other way round. The new democratic upsurge does not merely mean a greater number of voters, it also means a massive influx of new beliefs not shaped by the high ideology of liberal democracy. The subaltern acceptance of the democratic invitation inevitably means a reshaping of the political agenda in accordance with their tastes, convictions and expectations. Whether it is Mayawati's venomous utterances or Laloo Yadav's histrionics, the vocabulary of politics has come to reflect, even if momentarily, the world of popular culture. Seen from the vantage point of high ideologies, this is nothing less than an ideological degeneration or rather scandal. The assembly elections did not and could not have bridged this radical incomprehensibility. The reshaping of the political agenda to reflect the influence of popular beliefs in the public arena remains a major ideological challenge in contemporary Indian politics which, if not met, can corrode the legitimacy of the democratic political order.

#### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

As interventions in an essentially contested cognitive domain, interpretations of politics

cannot escape the politics of interpretation. Therefore the political agenda implicit in the reading of electoral politics offered above is best explicated, even if, in an abbreviated manner. For those who take the consolidation and radicalisation of democracy as the agenda of transformative politics today, the challenge is to take the recent participatory upsurge to its radical conclusion. It is a two-pronged political challenge. It is an organisational challenge on the one hand, involving the forging of a new political instrument capable of responding to the democratic upsurge in a way the established political formations are unable to. The creation of an organisation capable of tapping the enormous energy released into the political processes by the entry of the hitherto unincorporated sections into mainstream politics and the intervention of non-party political formations, working at the grass roots level and reflecting the federal character of Indian society within its organisation without ceasing to function at the all-India level or rejecting the task of building a democratic organisational structure, is surely a historic need today. But history does not fulfil to its own needs. On the other hand, it is an ideological challenge requiring innovative institutional designs which may reduce the existing disjunction between the cultural codes of ordinary citizens and the imported institutions of modern liberal democracy, incorporation of new issues thrown up by social movements into the political agenda and the creation of a chain of democratic equivalence among various such issues within a single ideological framework. Such a proposal might sound hopelessly romantic in the face of shrinking horizons of political possibilities. But the limits of political possibilities are drawn and redrawn as much by human imagination and agency as by the external world of causality and structures. This is one lesson well worth remembering in a society which has, in the last one hundred years, witnessed an extraordinarily creative and transformative role of politics.

## Notes

[This paper has profited from discussions at the national seminar 'Assembly Elections and their Political Implications' organised by the Indian Council of Social Science Research at New Delhi on May 9-11, 1995, and from presentations made at the Centre for Political Studies, JNU, Centre for Public Affairs, Delhi, and at Departments of Political Science of MS University of Baroda, Poona University and University of Hyderabad. I wish to thank my colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies for stimulating discussions, Rustam for a critical reading and Sanjay, Kanchanji, Himanshu, and Hilal for

helping me with the tables. I am grateful to Manoranjan Mohanty and Ghanshyam Shah for reminding me of the larger concerns beyond electoral politics and to Bashiruddin Ahmed and Rajni Kothari for inspiration and encouragement.]

- 1 The 16 states included in this overview are Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Uttar Pradesh (1993); Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Goa, Sikkim (1994); and Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa, Manipur, Amnchal Pradesh and Bihar (1995). The three north eastern states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura which went to polls in early 1993 have been excluded from the analysis. This overview also avoids any independent consideration of the political trajectory of these states and the state-specific patterns of electoral outcome which I have analysed in a series of articles in *Frontline*: 'Gujarat BJP Arrives, a Neat Two-party Structure Emerges\*', Paradox in Maharashtra: Victory For from Decisive. May 5, 1995; A Two-party Affair: It's Congress vs BJP [in Gujarat]\*. 'Waveless in Orissa: The Return of Normal Election', March 10, 1995; 'Fragmented Scene [in Manipur]', 'Crumbling Dominance [in Maharashtra]', February 24, 1995; Trends and Patterns [in Karnataka]. 'Anatomy of a Wave [in Andhra Pradesh]', January 27, 1995; (with Ashis Banerjee) 'Victory of Strategy: MP, A State in Slow Transition', The Great Leveller: The Anti-BJP Wave in Himachal', January 28, 1994; (with MN Thakur) 'Madhya Pradesh: Placid Waters. Where No Wave Originated'. A Political Mosaic? Different Trends in UP's Seven Regions'. December 3, 1993; The Himachal Landscape', 'Rajasthan: A Two Party State?' November 19, 1993.
- 2 Although a good deal of the reluctance of a whole generation of Indian political scientists to study elections can be explained by a sociology of academic knowledge (accidents of academic socialisation, political correctness or simply the fear of numbers), there is a genuine intellectual basis for this reserve. The routinisation of election research by run-of-the-mill election studies which followed the first generation of vigorous and sensitive survey research evoked a peculiar response

among inuiiii political scientists: critique of narrowly focused, badly executed and poorly theorised election studies turned into a critique of election studies as such. Instead of a creative confrontation of various approaches to the study of the phenomenon of election, the debate turned into a rather gross opposition between those who would and those who would not study elections. Any study of elections came to be associated with borrowed jargon, mindless use of statistics, spurious fieldwork and irrelevance, not to speak of political conservatism. The disastrous consequences this association had both for election studies and the understanding of an Indian politics ac- amply evident in post-1971 literature (if we date a study not by die time of its publication but by the election it studied). The present paper is based on the conviction that students of Indian democracy need to revitalise and. at the same time, reorient the study of electoral politics.

- 3 This phenomenon was first recognised and theorised by Samuel Eldersveld and Bashiruddin Ahmed in *Citizens and Politics. Mass Political Behaviour in India*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1978. pp 214-16
- 4 Dal ton. Back and Flanagan report an average of 8.7 per cent volatility for 17 advanced industrial democracies for the period 1970-77. Russel J Dalton. Scott C Flanagan and Paul Allen Beck (eds). *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies: Realignment or Dealignment?* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984, p 10
- 5 For this thesis see. William G Vanderbok, 'Critical Elections. Contained Volatility and the Indian Electorate' in *Diversity and Dominance in Indian Politics. Vol I: Changing Bases of Congress Suppttrt*, Richard Sisson and Ramashray Roy. Sage (eds). New Delhi, 1990. For an insightful analysis of electoral volatility see. GausOrumMogensen. 'Political Disorder and Electoral Volatility in India: An Ecological Study of Eight National Elections, 1957-89', unpublished MA dissertation. Institute for Statskundskab. Aarhus University, Denmark, 1994.
- 6 I borrow this phrase from E Sndharan who was kind enough to share his unpublished research and insights with me.

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