
Working of Indian Liberal Democracy and the Emerging Issues

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Abstract: *In the early fifties, Indian national elites opted for a Liberal Democracy. The initiation of the experiment of Liberal Democracy was based upon the belief that this model, based upon a comprehensive system of liberal values like universal adult franchise, fundamental rights, parliament, independent judiciary, competitive party system, nationally recruited bureaucracy, etc. would usher in an era of open liberal and plural political system. Thus, the reason for following a pattern of liberal democracy was basically the faith of Indian national elites in the approach of modernization on the line of western democratic processes. In this context its important to mention that Liberal Democratic State was one pertinent institution which contributed towards the smooth functioning of the Liberal Democracy in the first two decades after independence. It is only in the recent decades that the dilemmas and contradictions associated with the “modern notion of the State” have unfolded themselves, what came to be known as “Crisis of Institutions”. The paper therefore seeks to explore the working of Indian Liberal democracy since independence and the emerging debates and issues specifically providing a critique to the Liberal Democratic assumptions.*

Keywords: Key Words: Political Institutions, State, Liberal Democracy, Crisis, Modernisation, Governance, Dilemmas

1. Introduction

In the early fifties, Indian national elites opted for a Liberal Democracy. The initiation of the experiment of Liberal Democracy was based upon the belief that this model, based upon a comprehensive system of liberal values like universal adult franchise, fundamental rights, parliament, independent judiciary, competitive party system, nationally recruited bureaucracy, etc. would usher in an era of open liberal and plural political system. Thus, the reason for following a pattern of liberal democracy was basically the

faith of Indian national elites in the approach of modernization on the line of western democratic processes. Of all the nationalist elites, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru was the carrier of ideology of liberal democracy. He had a distinct approach to modernization through the political framework of democracy through parliamentary institutions and economic model of mixed economy. Partha Chatterjee has made an analysis of Pandit JawaharLal Nehru's political ideology, and he argues that Nehru's model of mixed economy and democratic socialism was in fact a specifically nationalist's marriage between the ideas of progress and social justice.¹

2. Liberal Democracy in First Two Decades of Post-Independence Period

The liberal democratic model was justified by not only the nationalist elites but also by the political analysts in the beginning. Rajni Kothari specifically justified the liberal political institutions. According to him, the liberal democratic framework was ingrained into Indian politics because of successful interaction between the liberal politics and socio-cultural bases of Indian society. Being a liberal, he had a strong faith in liberal democracy and its institutions and he believed that diversity in Indian culture supplemented the process of democratic institution building in India, and he noted that in the Indian culture, there is a marked tendency towards, "agglomeration more than segmentation, accommodation more than conformation".² He found in the traditional social structure of India, values like ambiguity and spirit of tolerance, which according to him, went along very well with progressive values of Indian democracy. According to Kothari, this democratic model was gradually seeping down through the successful functioning of the mediating agencies like the political elites, the political

¹ Partha Chatterjee, *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

² Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1970, p. 233.

parties and the congress system.¹The political elite created, “a new political center which penetrated into the periphery through the uniquely Indian party system of mobilization, integration and democratic consensus building.”²Of all the agencies, the Congress functioned as the major mediating agency, which according to Kothari, “gave to the country a coherent and unified leadership, which could speak for the nation as a whole, and also acquired a power identity of its own”³. Along with congress, which played an autonomous role in the initial years of post-independence period, the institution of the state also performed a key part in the first two decades of post-independence period. Rajni Kothari attributed the positive role of the state, to the functioning of political elites. He *apropriovigore* submitted that the strength of Indian politics was an autonomous political elite, in the sense that the political elite had an influential position in not only deciding the direction of economic development but also creating a balance between different kinds of economic interests. In fact, Kothari found the Indian democracy and its institutional structure quite functional, in the early years of independence. He found the essential features of liberal democracy being applied in the required form; and he was quite appreciative of the liberal democracy of India as it functioned in the first two decades of independence.⁶

Sudipta Kaviraj also accepts the smooth functioning of Indian political system due to the successful operation of its institutions, particularly the elites like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in laying down the economic policies of the country. Sudipta Kaviraj opined that, it was because of a deliberate economic ideology of Nehru, that Indian state could evolve as a relatively autonomous state, and this was possible due to the emergence of a politically independent bourgeoisie class through which the state could pursue a relatively independent path of a reformist, welfarist, and capitalist development⁷ Thomas Pantham, has also appreciated the economic role of the Indian state in the initial Nehruvian period. In his opinion, the independent, national, non-

¹ *Ibid.* p.231
² *Ibid.*
³ *Ibid.* p.153.

aligned, liberal democratic, state was successful because it had greater relative autonomy from imperialist capital, and as such, in achieving this greater relative autonomy, the ideological mix of Liberalism, Marxism and Gandhism had an important goal⁸. It thus seems that, the Indian state was much more consolidated in the initial era as compared to the period that followed. Kaviraj, though, very critical of the Indian state has opined that the record of the Indian nation state in the first three decades was 'fairly respectable'⁹

3. Liberal Democracy and the Impending Crisis

The Indian Politics changed its direction in the process of its functioning after the first two decades of post-independence period. This can be attributed to the fact that, the positive note, with which the Liberal framework began, in the initial period began to be featured with despair and disillusionment. Consequently, by seventies, this optimism in the liberal framework, especially its institutional component was faced with a lot of problems. By the end of the third decade, Indian political scientists had started focussing their attention on what they termed as the 'crisis of institutions' in India. It was argued that the institutional structure of Indian politics, which had provided a healthy basis of its initiation, had lost its vitality – that is, there was a major gap between the functional assumptions underlying the institutions and the way these institutions were operating. It was highlighted, that major institutions like Parliament, had been seriously affected by the process of erosion of values. Degeneration was also perceived in other institutions like Cabinet and the institution of Prime Minister, giving indications of authoritarianism, centralization and erosion of basic parliamentary norms. The institutions of party system as well as electoral system were also found to be losing their credibility and legitimacy. Major concern of political analysts, was to focus their analysis on the decline of the hegemony of on the one hand, and the emergence of non-political parties both at the

national and the regional levels on the other hand.¹External as well internal factors together played an important role in the decline of the party. The external factors manifested themselves in the assertion of various groups on the one hand and inability of the Congress to manage their aspirations on the other hand. Whereas the internal factors, came in the form of factionalism and dissensions within the party itself. With the result, a split took place within the Congress in 1969. Ultimately, the Congress got restored under Mrs. Indira Gandhi, but the style of functioning of the Congress restored under Mrs. Indira Gandhi was entirely different from the functioning of the Congress in the initial years. According to Partha Chatterjee, the Congress under Mrs. Gandhi 'became an organization, which derived its identity from its leader.'²

Under the regime of Indira Gandhi, Congress adopted a broad based strategy, consisting of redistributive policies, such as nationalization of banks, abolition of privy purses and 'gribi hatao' – all were populist planks, used towards widening its support. And this strategy helped the Congress in winning the support of the rural masses on a large scale. Mrs. Gandhi's Congress, therefore, set forth the trend for populist and plebiscitary style of politics. According to Bose, in the process, Mrs. Gandhi established a style that 'prefigured the general political style of seventies and eighties.'³ This style which is termed as populist or plebiscitary etc. has often been 'characterized as one revolving around majoritarian politics; the 'majority' in this instance, being defined by a socio-economic criterion ('the poor', with Harijans, tribals and Muslims forming important subsets of this vast category).'⁴ Thus, majoritarian politics

¹ Op.cit .n.1.

² Partha Chatterjee, *State and Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, p.22.

³ Sumantra Bose, 'Hindu Nationism and Crisis of the Indian State: A Theoretical Perspective' in Sujata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds.), *Nationism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, p. 117.

⁴ Ibid.

began to find roots in Indian multiparty system, since Mrs. Gandhi's regime. This majoritarian politics, no doubt, played an important role in restoring the legitimacy of the Congress for the time being, but, it sowed the seeds of "even more serious institutional and ideological crisis that gripped state authority in the eighties and nineties."¹ However, such crisis of institutions has led to the crisis of good governability in India, wherein the State has lost its capacity to govern with transparency and openness or to promote developmental projects and to accommodate diverse interests. It has also been *amultifortiori*, expressed that "regressive corruption" replaced "progressive corruption" Atul Kohli analyses this state of affair as complete erosion of law, order and authority.² In his opinion, this erosion has been possible due to a breakdown of traditional patterns of authority and absence of new institutions to replace the traditional patterns. This, in his view has resulted in eruption of social discontent, fuelled by democratization process and the resistance of marginalized classes.¹² Analysing the institutional crisis, Rudolphs also reflected upon the plebiscitary and personalized politics of Mrs. Gandhi and held these factors responsible for demise of mediating politics in India. Deviation from the established norms, conceded to be a major reason for institutional crisis. It may thus seem that, the disintegration of Indian institutions was a reflection of the changes within the polity itself.³

For Kothari, the crisis of Indian politics lies in the change in the nature of the political elites who appear to have had become increasingly unable to resist the pressure of powerful, social and economic interests either at the national or international level. As such, it could not perform

¹ Ibid.

² Atul Kohli, 'Interpreting India's Democracy : A State Society Framework' in Atul Kohli's (ed.), *India's Democracy : An Analysis of Changing State Society Relations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988, p. 3.

³ In Myron Weinor, *The Indian Paradox*, AAGE, London, 1989, p. 11.

the role module of social transformation and social justice .He emphasises that “the leadership failed to relate institutional and programmatic means to this eventuality, with the result that before long, the institutions and programmes became static and vacuous and failed to restructure social reality.¹

Besides, Kothari also finds problems in the framework of economic development leading to the crisis of institutions. According to him, failure to deliver the goods in a period of growing expectations points to a need for basic structural changes in the system but, instead, produces a politics of postures, a purposely diffused populist rhetoric aimed at the poor and the dispossessed dramatic overtures of socialism. This is followed by a new genre of stalism, according to which, the fate of the socially deprived and the destitute rests securely in the hands of the state and a strong central authority. This, according to Kothari, “leads to a political style that seeks to establish a direct link with the masses and evolves symbols of solidarity and blind trust in charismatic leaders and in turn underrates the importance of intermediate institutions and mediating structures.”² Kaviraj has also presented an elaborate analysis of the crisis of institutions and as per his analysis, the institutional crisis is due to their being alien to the traditional Indian cultural framework and not much effort was made by the political elite to indianise them or to root them in Indian masses.

4. Emerging Discourses

The focus of political analysts, concerning crisis of Indian Politics reflects the turbulence in the functioning of the state. It has been observed that the state mainly caters to the dominant sections of the society and that; it has failed to accommodate the interests of the weaker sections.³ This has set in motion, a discourse on the nature of state and civil society in India. Besides, raising the issues related to the nature of the Indian State also focuses on the questions

¹ Ibid. p.41.

² Ibid. p.41.

³ Ibid.

of rights and the nature and functioning of democracy in India. This discourse on democracy also is a response to the grass-root initiatives that have emerged conceptions and these liberal conceptions are advocacies of theories of modernization. The nationalist leaders and the National Movement, in fact, reflected a bias towards the concepts of liberalism and modernism and when it came to the choice for the political paradigm for independent India, the Nationalist leaders automatically opted for a liberal model. This must be because of their familiarity with this model through colonial experience.

A lot of debate in India has taken place on the effect of modern concepts and the process of modernity and development. Modernity has intervened not only the political processes but also the social and political analysis. An interesting discourse is therefore available on the understanding of modernization, liberalism, development and their critique. More so in the context of their basic assumptions. The political system of India was based upon the modern liberal assumptions, and these assumptions were expected to yield a liberal national ethos that was expected to rationalize the social order in India, resulting in the development of a civic and secular culture. The crisis of the Indian state from this perspective of modernisation and liberalism is reflected in the existence of traditional societal values and primordial loyalties of caste, tribe and region. Here the problem is identified as an absence of liberal individualistic ethic. The expected achievement of a high degree of industrialization, differentiation and political participation on the lines of liberal achievement oriented society with highly differentiated democratic institutions, is still to be attained. India is understood as a tradition bound society where ethnic and religious cleavages play an important role and where liberal individual ethic is hard to develop. This is considered to be a constraint to the functioning of democracy in India.¹ The concept of

¹ Gurpreet Mahajan, *Identities and Rights: Aspects of Liberal Democracy in India*, Oxford University Press (OUP), Calcutta, 1998, pp. 16-17.

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modernization thus fails on both counts; it is unable to offer an adequate picture of the modern west and it cannot grasp the dilemmas of the modernizing world. On the one hand, it errs in judgement when it assumes that ethnic conflicts will naturally resolve themselves in the process of development; and on the other, it remains completely blind to the ways in which communities are re-entering the democratic process in the advanced, developed world.”¹

There emerged a particular kind of discourse in the post-colonial India. This was a discourse of national liberation movements in post-colonial states. The important issues which dominated the national liberal discourse were an independent nation-state, development and modernization. All these goals of industrialization, modernization and nation-building were, therefore, taken up with full enthusiasm by the post-colonial national elites. They were taken up with a view that the accomplishment of the goals would help in dissolving all the primordial loyalties which could hinder the process of development. In this vein, Sarah Joseph expresses that, “these three processes were perceived as linked and mutually supportive since it was believed that industrialization and modernization would help to dissolve the ‘primordial’ and regional loyalties which could hinder the development of a national political community.”² However, the above goals in the recent years are being critically evaluated overtly and covertly. As far as the developmental projects of the state are concerned, they have not only failed in the realization of their promised goals, but they have also led to a number of new problems and political tensions. The important issues related in this context are the problems associated with increasing poverty, economic stagnation, ever-widening economic gaps, ecological degradation and so and so forth. Besides the critique of

¹ Ibid. pp. 20-21.

47. In Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox*, AAGE, London, 1989, p.11.

48. Sarah Joseph, *Interrogating Culture: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Social Theory*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998, p. 263.

modernity and development, a lot of discourse has evolved in India around the concept of Nationalism .Nationalism has had its strong footing in cultural heritage and its sustainability in India. And as such, the two goals of political independence and cultural autonomy were interlinked and nation in fact was projected as being grounded in a pre-existing cultural community. Therefore, the definition of nation for the nationalist leaders was based upon cultural community.

Reacting against colonial perceptions of their societies as defused and segmented and lacking a common political identity which could sustain a modern nation-state, they asserted that cultural continuity and a common identity had always been present in their societies. A holistic notion of the cultural community was projected on to the (imagined) national community and an independent and continuous identity was claimed for the nation.¹

It was this presumption of grounding the Indian Nation in a continuous historically evolved culture that the concept of Indian nation-state was rooted during the National Movement. The modern Indian leadership led by Nehru as well as the framers of the Indian Constitution were also governed by this context of the nation-state. Five decades of post independence working with political democracy in India has presented sweet and sour experiences which have led many to understand the limited and restrictive nature of this concept of nation-state. In the political discourse that has shaped itself in considerations to this limitation, this concept has been seen as an implicit basis for hegemonising tendencies of the dominant culture. In the search for a continuous and commonly shared culture to form the basis of the nation-state, there has been virtual dominance of the culturally dominant group. This has led to

¹ Ibid. p. 63.

political gimmicks of majority, minority and other underprivileged groups thus creating a wedge in the well knit cultural Indian society on the specious projections of Indian society into majoritarianism and minoritism. It is this context of nation-state that has not been in consonance with the plurality of Indian Society. More so, because of the emphasis on unity and uniformity in diversity. Such emphasis on unity has led to a commonsensical response that all differences are unhealthy for the nation-state. Hence, diversity instead of finding a space for its expression has been viewed as dangerous to the existence of the nation-state and therefore there have been attempts to repress them. In other words, the hegemonising political identity of the nation-state has been imposed upon by all its members. In the changing political discourse, broader questions related to the nature of the nation-state and its search for cultural identity has been raised. The context for these questions has been provided by plurality and difference of Indian Society. It is argued that management of diversity is a continuous process and plural societies aim at achieving a harmonious, interdependent co-existence among communities. What is important is maintaining the distinctiveness of each identity. In a context of a 'modern' concept of nation-state seeking cultural uniformity, there may be a danger of violating the identity of those communities which lie at the fringes of society and are underprivileged. This can become a process of mainstreaming the majority community and representing its culture as that of the nation-state. Of late, it is considered important to redefine the nation-state with reference to the socio-cultural diversity. Many political analysts have emphasized on the importance of heterogeneity and plurality rather than on unity and uniformity. The concept of nation, as defined in terms of unity and integrity has come to be challenged in the context of a counter discourse, forcefully presented by Bhartiya Janta Party Party. This discourse is related to the concept of single national identity seen through cultural symbols. This is an identity of one nation and one culture, developing the Indian nation to her own ethos on the basis of integral humanism. For some critics, this discourse of single national identity has resulted in undermining the pluralistic nature of Indian society.

Besides, the debate on Secularism is also continuing in India. This debate is a part of the larger discourse on plurality and differences. This discourse is based upon the basic assumptions of secularism as underlying the Indian Constitution as well as the practice of actual politics involving the questions like majoritarianism, minority rights as well as the issues related to community vs. individual rights. The political discourse within the Constituent Assembly which drafted the Indian Constitution was influenced by the liberal democratic values of the political elite of the time. In accordance with this discourse, it was imperative to provide collective group rights to minority communities. Secularism was defined in terms of freedom of religion and a basic right given to every citizen in terms of religious worship and practice. This discourse clearly emphasized that the state could not intervene in religious matters and that it was its duty to protect the minorities and ensure their collective rights of all Indian citizens, irrespective of caste, culture, religions, belief, faith, etc. In a broader sense, the preservation of the linguistic and cultural identity of the minorities was considered to be the most important test of secularism in India. What was highlighted was a protection against the "possibility of cultural assimilation and homogenization by the nation state."¹ It was in accordance with these assumptions that the Indian Constitution provided for the liberty to worship, propagate and practice religion under article 25 of the Constitution subject to law, morality and public order. However this notion of Secularism is withering with the development of various political gimmicks whereon instigated and contrived versions of secularism is being presented. Many political analysis feel that secularism acquired a very different connotation in India as compared to its western meaning where it had originated. According to S.L. Sharma, Secularism stresses upon expulsion of religion and religious considerations from the arena of public policy, in India, it

¹ S.L. Sharma, 'Rethinking Secularism in India' in S. Bhatnagar and Pradeep Kumar (ed.), *Some issues of Contemporary Indian Politics*, Ess Ess Publications, New Delhi, p. 36.

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connotes accommodation of religious sensibilities in state policy. In the West, secularism stands for an important part of modernisation and rationalization, while in India it expresses a preference for preserving cultural pluralism.¹ It is this emphasis on cultural pluralism which informed the secularism discourse and which emphasized on the constitutional, religious, cultural, educational and political claims of communities. The need of the hour, in order to preserve the posterity, seems to revisit the constitutional cultural discourse to understanding the constitution conceived notion of secularism and present day practiced notion of it.

5 Conclusion

The liberal democratic order which had a smooth sailing in the first two decades of post independence period is now being critically evaluated. This critical evaluation can be attributed to the deviation of this model from its promised agendas and commitments. Consequently a lot many discourses have come up to define contemporary India which is today featured by a period of severe strains and stresses.

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