

Rethinking State Politics in India: Regions within Regions

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From a dominant national perspective, political analysis in India has gradually shifted its unit of study to the state level. There remains a dearth of literature that employs intra-state or inter-state regional perspectives in a comparative political analysis framework.

Recent India has been witness to the onset of the democratic processes that have resulted in the reconfiguration of its politics and economy. Among these processes, most significant has been the assertion of identity politics. There have been struggles around the assertiveness and conflicting claims of the identity groups, and of struggles amongst them, often fought out on lines of region, religion, language (even dialect), caste and community. These struggles have found expressions in the changed mode of electoral representation that has brought the local/regional into focus with the hitherto politically dormant groups and regions finding voices. A more genuinely representative democracy has led to the sharpening of the line of distinction between or among the identity groups and the regions.

The process has received an impetus with the introduction of the economic reforms as the marginal groups as well as the peripheral regions increasingly feel left out with the central state gradually withdrawing from the social and economic sector and market economy privileging the privileged, be it the social groups or the regions.¹ Coastal states along with the high income states have benefited more from the flow of foreign direct investment as compared to the states having peripheral locations, disturbed law and order situations, and poor economic and social infrastructure (Kurian 2000; Ahluwalia 2000; Kohli 2006). Regional inequalities in income and consumption have been widening. Interstate as well as intra-state disparities in terms of per capita income have grown faster in the post-reforms period.² What may be called the “secession of the rich”,³ even the rich states, attracting huge private investments and registering impressive growth, have started resenting the continued dependence of relatively underdeveloped states on the central revenues transferred to them. Similarly, the relatively developed regions within the states also

have been complaining of reverse discrimination as in the case of Harit Pradesh.

The above processes have contributed to the regionalisation of polity with the states emerging as the prime arenas where politics and economy actually unfold.⁴ It is now the state level vernacular elites often belonging to the hitherto dormant identity groups who influence or make the policy decisions and whose choices actually affect economic and political happenings in their respective states. A study of the micro-level mechanisms, which are shaping political actions and processes of mobilisation at local level, has therefore now become imperative for an understanding of the internal dynamics of Indian politics and economy as well as for drawing the theoretical conclusions on a larger canvas. There has been a growing realisation that it is at the state level that the “future analyses of Indian politics must concentrate” (Chhibber and Nooruddin 1999).

Greater level of recognition of state as the primary unit of analysis has led to the emergence of state politics as an autonomous discipline, whose study is now being considered essential for a nuanced understanding of Indian politics. Ironically, the new found exalted status of the discipline is in sharp contrast to its earlier dismal state when it was treated merely as an appendage of the discipline of Indian politics (read “national politics”).

Three Factors

The lack of autonomy of the discipline of state politics at the time could be attributed primarily to three factors. First, within the grand comparative analytical framework developed by the liberal schools of political modernisation and political development to study the developing societies that dominated “third world” political theory, the newly independent nation states were considered as the prime movers in terms of economy and politics and therefore were taken as the fundamental units of analysis. In the quest of reaching about a general theory that would have near universal application (recall stage theory of growth), the constituent units within the nation state and their historical specificities were completely ignored. Quite a few Indian political theorists under the spell of the

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American Political Science Association followed suit.

As for Marxist writings on Indian politics they have remained under the spell of neo-Marxist critiques in the form of under-development/dependency/world systems that again took the “post-colonial state” as the unit of analysis. Second, due to the prevalence of what used to be called the “Congress system”, the politics and economy (refer the development planning model) at the state level at the time was very much guided by a dominant centre with the “high command” pulling the key strings of power. State politics thus appeared merely as a poor copy of the politics unfolding at the national level. Third, in the then euphoria of the Nehruvian era, when the whole emphasis was on institution/state/nation building under the leadership of a nationalist and modernising state elite that commanded tremendous degree of confidence and legitimacy, it was inevitable that politics at the state level would be studied from the national perspective even if it was at the cost of missing the esoteric details concerning the regional states (Yadav and Palshikar 2006). Arguably there was an all-pervading feeling shared by the intelligentsia of the time that too much attention to state affairs was a mark of parochial attachments.⁵

The 1967 Elections

The defining moment for the discipline came in the form of general elections held in 1967 which marked the beginning of the veering away of different states, at different points of time and through different ways, from the Congress system (Kothari 1970). The grudging recognition of the states, once considered the bane of Indian unity, as the “mainstay of India’s democracy and the crucial building block of the Indian nation” (Mitra 2006: 46) also facilitated the emergence of state politics as a discipline in its own right. Consequently, the next two decades that followed saw the publication of the volumes on state politics edited by Myron Weiner (1968), Iqbal Narain (1976), John R Wood (1984) and Francine Frankel and M S A Rao (1990).

Falling into what one may consider now as belonging to somewhat outmoded genre of writings, the first three edited volumes, mentioned above, included

state-specific papers that were basically focused on enumerating the determinants of the state level political dynamics in great empirical details. For the scholars contributing to these volumes, regional states provided more or less a self-contained universe (called “microcosm” as well as “macrocosm” by Weiner 1968: 4) within which their politics (mainly electoral) were conducted and analysed. Based on state-specific empirical details about the political history, the politico-administrative structure, changing patterns of political participation, the nature of party system and the performance of the political regimes; the volumes’ papers presented descriptive analyses of the nature and dynamics of the political processes in the particular states. Employing a political sociological approach, which was hugely inspired by the modernisation theory literature, the essays in the volumes essentially privileged the “political” while relatively ignoring the “economic”.

The two volumes, edited by Rao and Frankel, however, belonged to a somewhat different genre, much more in tune with the then emergent trend in the study of state politics, as the essays focused on the historical patterns of political transformation taking place in particular states. The varying relationship between caste and class in the states, especially in terms of the land question, came up in several essays for theoretical inquiries while trying to unravel the problematic of “the decline of dominance” of the traditional elites in the rural hinterlands.

Similar in tenor to the then prevailing trend, all the edited volumes, mentioned above and others contained essays that focused on one state. There was hardly any effort on the part of the contributors to use their state-specific studies for building up a larger argument about the emergent nature of Indian politics. Almost all of them studiously avoided employing a comparative interstate framework or developing a theoretical framework for their empirical analyses.⁶

How can one explain the marked reluctance on the part of the political analysts to employ the comparative framework while undertaking the study of state politics? The segmented nature of polity and variegated nature of society besides

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extreme fluidity in the nature of state politics were often cited as the reasons as to why the advantages of comparative studies across the states could not be adequately explored (Pai 2000: 2).⁷ Also compared to national politics, local politics was considered as limited in nature. Commonalities if any, discernable in the emerging trends in state politics, were ignored as only the distinctive features received attention.

The Comparative Method

Attempts to employ comparative method in the arena of state politics would gain some momentum as late as in the late 1980s. Atul Kohli (1987), one of the earliest comparativists, argued that India constituted a “laboratory for comparative political analysis” in the sense that despite having many states with quite diverse politics, the fact remains that these states are within the same “framework of Indian federalism” and therefore present an ideal type conditions for “controlled experiments”.

The burgeoning literature that has come up on the subject since can broadly be categorised into three categories.

The first category would include the studies that focus in-depth on a single state, but use the concrete analysis to underpin larger theoretical arguments that can be applied elsewhere in India, something that was not attempted earlier. Most of these studies, however, are not comparative in nature. The writings that stand out include those of Jagpal Singh (1992), Narendra Subramanian (1999), Zoya Hasan (1989), Sanjib Baruah (1999), Pradeep Kumar (2000), Navneeta Chadha Behera (2000), Amit Prakash (2002), Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) and Gyanesh Kudasia (2006).

Studies on the nature of electoral politics at the state level based on Centre for Study of Developing Societies-Lokniti conducted national election studies (NES) survey data would fall into second category. These theoretically sensitive studies are distinguishable from most of the writings on state electoral politics, which are either in the genre of “mindless empiricism” or

“are in the form of impressionistic theorisations” (Nigam and Yadav 1999). These academic efforts have been enabling in the sense that they aim at an understanding of the larger forces and long-term changes taking place in the state party system and electoral politics during the “third phase of democratisation in India” (Palshikar 2004: 1478).

A reading of the state-specific articles in this genre, written by the Lokniti network members for *Economic & Political Weekly*⁸ reveal not only the basic determinants of electoral politics in the state like the demographic composition and nature of ethnic/communal/caste cleavages as well as other socio-political cleavages like the regional, rural-urban and caste-class linkages but also present an analysis of the electoral outcomes highlighting differences in major issues raised, emergent trends, alliance formations, seat adjustments, selection of candidates and campaigns and so on. The survey data helps the authors in explaining the opinions and attitudes of the electorates having different age, sex, caste,



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community, and class and education profiles. Going beyond merely the journalistic task of counting the votes/profiling the electoral behaviour/predicting future political reconfigurations/realignments, these essays do refer to the critical questions like: Did the voters have any real choice? Did the electoral politics have a real impact over public policies in relations to the substantive social and economic issues?

The above articles written over a period of one and half decade covering different state elections confirm extreme fluidity in the nature of electoral permutations and combinations that come to assume power at the central or state levels. However, they also reveal that despite the region specific nature of electoral politics and the emergence of distinct identities, newer trends in Indian politics do reveal certain commonalities across the country, i.e., presence of electoral regions either as historically constituted or merely administrative ones; the emergence of electoral bipolarities; and lastly the politicisation and mobilisation of the "old, received, but hitherto dormant identities" (Kumar 2003: 3146).

Besides the state-specific commentaries, there are also other important volumes/essays which do attempt to develop a coherent and a systematic theoretical framework based on NES data to make sense of the nature of electoral democracy in India (Yadav 1996; Chibber 1999; Mitra and Singh 1999; Palshikar 2004; Suri 2005; Yadav and Palshikar 2006, 2008, 2009;⁹ Heath et al 2006; Varshney 2007). In the same Lokniti genre of studies falls the volumes edited by Hansen and Jaffrelot (2001) and Roy and Wallace (2003 and 2007).

Studies that employ interstate comparative method to look for the commonalities and differences in the politics of two or more comparable states, and then armed with their findings, reflect and theorise on a broader canvass would fall into the third category. These studies are based on the assumption that the regional states in India provide an ideal environment for the purpose of a comparative analysis, provided that the units are autonomous and homogeneous for the purpose of the study and the cases are selected in a manner that minimises biases. Most of the literature in this category takes up the research questions related to one thematic area like

the issue of governance or ethnicity and select purposefully (and not randomly) the states as the sampling units to keep the study focused and also make comparison possible. The writings, based on interstate comparative approach that have come up since the momentous decade of the 1990 include that of Atul Kohli (1987),¹⁰ Emma Mawdsley (1998), John Harriss (1999),¹¹ Ashutosh Varshney (2002),¹² Gurharpal Singh (2000), Kanchan Chandra (2005), Aseema Sinha (2005),¹³ Subrata K Mitra (2006),¹⁴ and Niraja Gopal Jayal (2006).

The widely acclaimed volume on state politics, edited by Rob Jenkins (2004), falls in the above genre of the studies, as the volume includes essays that employ a two-state comparative method to take up four sets of thematic areas, namely, economic policymaking (Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Gujarat); subaltern politicisation (Bihar and Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan); civic engagement (Kerala and Uttar Pradesh); and political leadership studies (Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu). Picking up threads from Kohli's notion of India as a "laboratory of democracy", Jenkins refers to the robust form of federalism that enables the political analysts to undertake a comparative analysis of the politics of India's "29 mini democracies" that have "almost identical institutional infrastructures" and who operate under similar "economic policy framework and the legal protections enshrined in the Indian constitution".

Regions within Regions

Notwithstanding the impressive range of studies on state politics that have come up in the last decade, there has been a dearth of literature that employs intra-state or interstate regional perspectives in a comparative mode. This is despite the fact that cultural heterogeneity of the regions within the states over the years has been sharpened as a result of the unevenness of development and unequal access to political power in a centralised federal political economy (Sathiyamurthy 2000: 33). No wonder then that the recent decades have been witness to well defined geographically, culturally and historically constituted distinct regions that have emerged within the states, showing

sharpened ethnic/communal/caste as well as other social-political cleavages like the regional and rural-urban ones.¹⁵

As a note of caution, for a comparativist, the task of comparing disparate political phenomena in a complex diverse society like India is not easy. Adopting a highly localised approach to bring out regional distinctiveness invariably involves the in-depth study of an entire range of factors that make a political situation in the way it exists. To avoid oversimplified generalisation, a comparativist working on India would do well to undertake concrete analysis of specific situations in two or more regions that are highly localised and issue specific (say the regional movements demanding separate statehood in different parts of India) and then look for the differences and not merely adding up the similarities. In a major advantage of employing a region-based approach, it would not only enable the comparativists to reframe the whole debate but also interrogate the cogency of conventional formulations, often derived from an analysis that took the regional state as the unit of analysis.

As regions within the states are not merely politico-administrative instituted constructs but are also imagined or constituted, among others, in historical, geographic, economic, sociological or cultural terms, any meaningful comparative study of the regions would naturally straddle the disciplinary boundaries of social sciences. An amalgamation of political sociological and political economy approaches thus would encourage social analysts from different disciplines and not merely from political science to unravel the complexity of the emergent nature of regional politics.

Taking up the regions within the states as distinctive analytical category would ensure that the smaller pictures/narratives are not lost amidst the larger ones. It is our argument that such micro-studies though challenging in nature would be further enriching the discipline of state politics.

NOTES

- 1 Few peripheral regions, which are the hot spots of economic reforms, are in the throes of the peoples' movement, as locals feel being taken for a ride by both the government and the multinationals in the name of development.
- 2 Calling the post-reform period as "a period of growth with inequality", Nagaraj has observed that the so-called high growth of Indian economy "has favoured urban India, organised sector, richer states and property owners, against rural India,

- unorganised sector, poorer states and wage earners... India's growth process during the last two decades does not seem to have been a virtuous one – it has polarised the economy" (Nagaraj 2000: 2831).
- 3 "If the growth prospects of the nation get tied to the degree of success in enticing direct foreign investment, then the richer regions feel that they would be better placed in this regard if they acted on their own, unencumbered by the burden of belonging to the same country as the poor, violent, crime-infested regions" (Patnaik 2000: 153).
 - 4 In electoral terms, there have been two indicators that stand out among others, in the context of the regionalisation argument. One, the representation of the state level parties in the legislative bodies has increased to the level that it appears that the national polity is little more than the aggregation of the regional. Two, the national parties have increasingly adopted state-specific electoral campaigns and the policies.
 - 5 Significantly, Weiner justified the need to undertake political research on the Indian states by suggesting that it was at the state level that the "conflicts among castes, religious groups, tribes, and linguistic groups and factions are played out" and which hampers the "efforts to modernise" (Weiner 1968: 6).
 - 6 The state volume edited by John Wood (1984) did have a comparative essay by Roderick Church. Based on the study of the emergent caste politics of the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat, Church came out with an argument that has relevance even now. He argued that at the time, among the different categories of landowning twice-born upper castes, the farming middle/intermediate castes, the land less agricultural as well as the service and artisan lower castes and the scheduled castes, it were the lower castes, numerically weak and dispersed and also sandwiched between the middle and the ex-unouchable castes, which were facing resistance and even attempt at the cooption of their leadership by the upper and middle dominant castes whenever they sought a larger share in the political processes. Church (1984: 231) argued with a sense of prescience that the "lower castes are the last stratum to be brought into politics".
 - 7 Writing in the late 1970s, Narain referred to the fact that one had "to deal here not with one pattern but with several patterns of state politics which (were) emerging, if at all, through none too steady pull and swing of politics at the central and state levels" (Narain 1976: xvi).
 - 8 Refer two special issues of EPW. One was on *National Election Study 2004*, Vol 39, No 51, 18-24 December 2004. The other one was on *State Parties, National Ambitions*, Vol 39, Nos 14 and 15, 3-9 April 2004). Some of these papers have been included in an edited volume, which is in the form of an anthology on political parties (deSouza and Sridharan 2006). Most recently EPW in a special volume on state elections 2007-08 has published a set of state-specific commentaries on assembly elections accompanied by an essay by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar that sets the context and also provide an overview for comparative analysis (Vol XLIV, No 6, 7-13 February 2009).
 - 9 While emphasising the autonomy of state politics from national politics, Yadav and Palshikar (2008, 14-22) present a "preliminary frame" for interstate comparative analysis by presenting the critical issues for enquiry in the form of what they call the ten theses on state politics in India.
 - 10 Atul Kohli undertook an extensive field-based research to gauge the effectiveness of different party regimes in undertaking the anti-poverty measures. Based on the principle of purposive selection, Kohli selected three case studies where poverty alleviation policies had achieved the maximum (West Bengal governed by the Left Front), or the minimum success (Uttar Pradesh governed by the Jana-ta coalition), and the third one that fell into the middle category (Karnataka governed by Congress with Devraj Urs as the Chief Minister). The difference of the "regional distributive outcomes" in terms of pro-poor measures were a "function of the regime controlling political power", as party dominated regimes in India "closely reflects the nature of the ruling political party. The ideology, organisation and class alliances underlying a party dominated regime are then of considerable consequence" (Kohli 1987: 10).
 - 11 Like Kohli, Harriss also employed the comparative framework to take up a policy study seeking to explain differential poverty reducing performance across states. For the purpose, Harriss revisited the state-specific essays in the Frankel and Rao volume after a gap of a decade to show as to how the differences in terms of balance of caste/class power and also in terms of the party systems in different states influence the policy process and the performance of the states. He argued that the states where the "power of the locally dominant castes/classes has been challenged to a great extent" or where "stable, relatively well-institutionalised parties compete for their votes" have done comparatively better in terms of poverty reduction (Harriss 1999: 3367-76).
 - 12 Varshney (2002) combines an interstate focus with an advocacy of taking up city as his unit of analysis for the study of communal riots involving the Hindus and the Muslims as he argues that the communal riots are urban phenomena in India.
 - 13 In her study of the politics of economic policy in the "large and multileveled polity" Sinha focuses on the dominant puzzle of "failed developmental state" in India, namely, as to why despite supposedly following an uniform developmental trajectory, marked by uniform central policy interventions and regulations under the development planning model for so long, whose remnants are still visible, the regional states in India have come to reveal very different developmental outcomes? More intriguingly, why there has been an uneven regional pattern of investment flow in those regional states even where historical and economic explanations might suggest convergence (She selects Gujarat and West Bengal as case studies)? Why West Bengal unlike Gujarat (and Tamil Nadu that had none of the initial advantages) has failed to attract a higher share of investment on the basis of its initial strengths as a private capital-intensive state? The explanation Sinha suggests lies in the form of the differing institutional and political capacities of the states. See Sinha (2004 and 2005).
 - 14 Subrata K Mitra (2006: 43). In another instance of purposive sampling, Mitra for his comparative study that aimed at measuring the level of governance in India selected six states from the "four corners of India" as the research sites where either the level of governance was perceived as low (Punjab and Bihar) or high (West Bengal and Maharashtra) or the ones that fell into the middle category (Tamil Nadu and Gujarat).
 - 15 Interestingly, there are a few studies that compare the politics of the specific regions in India with that of a region of another country mainly focusing on the identity-based politics (Sumantra Bose: 1999).

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