
UNIT 17 STATE AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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17.1 INTRODUCTION

The debate about the nature of the Indian federation as laid down in the constitution has gone on for about three decades now. The general trend of opinion has been to treat it as a federal constitution but with a very strong unitary bias. Its working during the last many decades has, however, been pronouncedly on unitary lines along with a steady encroachment on the powers of the states, which means that the Constitution provides mechanisms to the centre to encroach upon and curtail the rights and powers of the constituent states. In the 1990s in the era of coalition politics, which continues till now this process has been arrested though not reversed; all this due to the dependence of the Union governments on a variety of regional parties or the support of the Left. Moreover, provisions that make the centre all-powerful as against the states also tend to strengthen the executive as against the legislature. This process can in general terms be referred to as the centralisation of powers. This trend in turn gives rise to a counter movement on the part of the states to regain their powers.

17.2 FEATURES OF AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS

One manifestation of the fight back on the part of the states has taken the shape of the movements talked off as the state autonomy movements. It is more than the fight for financial resources, which has been a constant refrain on the part of the states. This is so because the division of powers between the centre and states is such that balance of powers tends to be against the states. Without going into details let us take just an instance. All the powers to impose taxes on constantly expanding incomes, like excise and custom duties or the income tax, also known as the elastic sources of income are with the centre. Whereas sources of income which are static, also referred to as inelastic, with the exception of sales tax, are with the states. As such the states become resource – starved and dependent on the centre for whatever they would like to undertake.

Apart from the struggle for financial resources, the state autonomy movements have a political dimension, which gives them a distinct character. This dimension involves issues such as the question of the exercise of powers by the centre under Art.356, to dismiss the state government, appoint and remove governors, standing of the states within the federal structure, and such other questions. In all of these the centre exercises discretionary powers and the states are quite at the mercy of the centre. The movements for state autonomy have been centered around these issues. The scope of the state autonomy movements can best be captured in what is contained in the document called the Sakaria Commission Report.

One way of understanding both the process of centralisation of political power and the manifestation of the counter-tendency in the shape of the demands for 'State autonomy' is to look at it, at one level, through the consolidation and differentiation of the ruling classes like the capitalists and the landlords and how they seek to manage their contradictions and, at another level, to relate it to the growing democratic aspirations and concrete struggles of the common people, the working class, the peasantry and the other toiling people. All these forces are represented in the various political parties and their combinations. Before we do so, for the proper understanding of these demands for state autonomy it is also essential to grasp the underlying forces that provide the push towards the centralisation of political power. The contradictory consequence of the working of the economy for the states and the centre and the kind of reactions it evokes is of importance. One very important consequence flows from the development of capitalism.

The development of capitalism necessitates, as one of its conditions, the formation of larger markets for commodity production. This condition and the requirements of the capital, which is growing bigger all the time, demand centralisation of decision-making. The centralisation of state power is in part a reflection of this inner logic inherent in the capitalist development. The consequent erosion of the rights of the states or denial of autonomy to them is not simply a matter of will of this or that leader or this or that party in a simple sense; there are deeper forces working. This is a trend discernible all over the world. The history of the evolution of the federation in USA or Canada clearly shows this. Hence the issue of state autonomy and state rights is more than a question of simple choice between federal and unitary preferences on only a constitutional level, in spite of the fact that the constitutional division of power is very important.

The trend towards the centralisation of power is inherent but how it works out in specific circumstances in different countries is dependent on the configuration of political forces.

17.3 THE INDIAN CASE

We are not looking at the global trends but only at the case of India. Let us look at Indian politics by breaking it into three landmark phases; the uninterrupted rule of the Congress party from 1947 to 1977, the rule of the Janata Party from 1977-1979, the return of the Congress in 1980, and the continuing era of coalition politics since 1996.

17.3.1 The Phase of Congress Hegemony: 1947-1977

In India in particular, the process of political centralisation was facilitated by the more or less uninterrupted rule of the Congress party for the first 30 years both at the centre and in most of the states and was necessitated by the challenges to the hegemony of the Congress rule. The

Congress moves were the attempts of an insecure leadership in the face of the mounting crisis of the capitalist path of development. In fact, due to the failures of the economy to even mitigate the hardships of the people, solving the basic problems apart, the Indian political system has been in a state of semi-permanent crisis. The political dominance of the Congress and its hegemony over state power not only helped it to contain by repression or manipulations the recurrent political crises but also aggravated, by the very logic of the situation, the tendency towards the centralisation and concentration of political power. Given the nature of divisions among the ruling class parties in India, the Congress had no difficulty in converting this centralised power into authoritarian rule in the shape of the emergency. The consequence, as we have all experienced in a gruesome form, was not just the erosion of federal principles and the negation of state rights and powers but also a complete negation of the democratic rights and civil liberties of the people, including sections of the ruling classes. It is in the context of these developments of the recent past and the possibility of their recurrence in a possible future that the struggle around the demand for state autonomy assumes importance and reveals its link with the struggle for democratic rights of the people.

Within the perspective given above, I will look at the interconnections between the different dimensions in the working out of the process of centralisation of state power. I will also go into the roots and needs of different state autonomy movements in India. Given the divergent class bases of different movements, e.g. the Akalis or different parties representing the Dravidian movement or Jammu and Kashmir or West Bengal etc., it is also necessary to see if any objective complementarities exist between these different parties fighting for the same issue.

These can help to explain, in spite of important discontinuities, the great similarities between the periods 1967-1969 and 1977-1979 with respect to the fortunes of the political parties as well as to the heightened articulation of the demand for state autonomy. Both these periods witnessed the decline of the Congress Party and the emergence of the regional political parties and formations to political prominence. In both the situations, apart from one or two states, the regional or regionally-based parties that gained at the cost of the Congress party were the ruling class regional parties. Similarly, the parties which formed governments in different states on both these occasions, were providing opposition to the Congress party both at the centre and in the states within a framework of similar policy preferences, e.g., Akalis in Punjab, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal in Uttar Pradesh, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, etc. It is possible to argue here that the growth and consolidation of the regional ruling class parties have been generally conditioned by the interests of the locally placed ruling class groups like the landlords and kulaks in Punjab, Haryana, western U. P., etc. or the non-big bourgeoisie in Tamil Nadu. It seems to me plausible to argue that differentiation in landed interests between different States is due to differential distribution of investments and concessions by the centre on top of the historically inherited consequences of land tenures, land development and productivity of land, crop specialisation, etc. In situations of economic crisis the inability of the state to dole out concessions to the dominant landed interests uniformly all over leads to discrimination and consequent dissatisfaction. This is likely to lead to conflicts of interest within the same class across the regions. Likewise, though in a different way, the non-big bourgeoisie may be objectively hampered by the operation of the market laws, which favour big bourgeoisie and thus impede the growth of locally placed non-big bourgeois groups. Such a condition, along with crystallised feelings of linguistic-cultural oppression, seems to provide the material basis for non-big bourgeoisie in certain clearly demarcated regions with a distinct population composition like Tamil Nadu to

strike an alliance with the landlords there in a potent regional formation – the Dravidian movement. Under circumstances like these, the locally placed ruling class groups seek greater power for themselves through the regional parties in power or opposition so that these can be used to further their own interests when these are perceived as not being best served by the all-India ruling class parties. Under circumstances like these, these ruling class groups avail of the popular discontent due to the deepening of economic crisis in order to build up oppositional politics in favour of the respective states. Such a configuration provides one objective ground on which regional movements thrive and seek greater” autonomy for” the states. .

As a consequence of the above, during 1967-1969, with the decline of the Congress party as the political monolith and the coming to prominence of regional political parties and formations, the question of Centre-State relations was posed with a new sharpness. The 1977-1979 period also witnessed the recurrence of the same phenomenon. But there is a distinct difference between 1967-1969 and 1977-1979 although the similarities are significant. The 1967 defeat of the Congress was only partial and did not threaten the Congress rule at the Centre. Unlike 1977 when the rout was total, the 1967 elections left open the possibility of tactical manoeuvres by the Congress to contain the political crisis. The Congress defeat of 1967 led to “toppling operations” with the use of Congress power at the centre along with a tactical shift to the left with recourse to radical slogans and rhetoric in a much more pronounced manner than ever before. The success of these moves depended, among others, on the power at the centre which facilitated supportive state actions in favour of the political faction under Indira Gandhi.

17.3.2 The Janata Phase: 1977-1979

The nature of the Janata Party in power at the centre was unlike any other party. It was a conglomerate of many opposition parties and its birth was an outcome of a rapid coming together of disparate opposition groups ranging from Jan Sangh to the Socialists and the breakaway group of the Congress party under Jagjivan Ram. Their interests and programmes were naturally very different. An extraordinary situation, the need to defeat the emergency regime of Indira Gandhi, brought them together. These parties became factions within the newly formed Janata Party and continued to represent their earlier interests and programmes; Jana Sangh of the commercial petty-bourgeoisie or feudal landlords in certain regions, the BLD/BKD/Lok Dal of landlords and kulaks in three or four states of northern India, Swatantra of the bourgeoisie and erstwhile feudal lords; the Congress (0) was the only party that represented, like the Indira Congress, the interests of the entire ruling class, and the socialist parties which did not have any close identity with any class except to present a vague combination of radicalism and peasant populism. The spectrum of interests they represented and viewpoints they presented made them no different from the Congress in terms of the class interests.

Such a conglomeration ruled at the centre but its different constituents were in power in different States in uneasy alliances with other constituents. In the absence of a viable compromise formula, their different social bases and mass support forced them to horse-trade within the Janata Party to so tilt the policies that their mass supports could be sustained. It also happened that the Janata party was much more dependent for its rule on the various regional parties than was the Congress except for a brief while during 1969-1971. The absence of internal cohesion as well of intra-party consensus on vital issues made it difficult for it to impose its will or to effectively protect or guide the ruling classes. All this made the federal process in Indian politics much more fluid and open to bargaining as it also facilitated the assertion of people’s power in both

organised and unorganised ways. Such a situation did not lead to any alteration in the rights of states in a constitutional-legal sense but gave a considerable margin politically to states under different political persuasions, like West Bengal, to strike an independent path without the fear of being toppled or excessively harassed. Likewise, the toiling people could also bargain better via-a-vis the ruling class power.

This division was not, from an ideological point of view, fundamentally different from what existed earlier. But there was a very significant fact: the support for the ruling class parties became, and was becoming, more and more atomised and relatively evenly spread whereas earlier it was concentrated around one party, the Congress party. Moreover, the left forces, especially the CPI(M), became relatively much more powerful than ever before without, however, having become decisive in the all-India context. The implications for the political process of this development—the conglomerate nature of the Janata party, the atomisation of other ruling class parties and the growth of left forces—were of far-reaching importance. Such a situation provided a conducive atmosphere for the assertion of people's power—mass movements, working class struggles, peasant agitations, etc. as well as for the struggle for and the consolidation of the rights and autonomy of various constituent States. The notable example of this was the comparative ease with which the Left Front-led government of West Bengal could push through with radical reforms. What needs to be noted here is the conglomerate nature of the Janata party; in other words, what became decisive was the absence of a monolith like the Congress party. In such situation different parties with very different ideological perspectives and representing diverse social and class interests joined together to fight for the rights of the states. It is obvious they would use the greater powers for the states for furthering very different interests.

Parties like AIADMK or Akali Dal represent specific interests of the dominant classes within their states, these parties are likely to seek greater power for themselves in the interests of locally placed ruling class groups, at a time when their interests are not being best served by the centralised state.

The left-democratic parties, on the other hand, need state autonomy in the interest of democratic economy and democratic polity. Their search for greater powers for the states can be fulfilled only when the class preferences of the working class and the peasantry can be materialised. The very logic of this involves the use of state autonomy for undermining the material bases of ruling class power. The left-democratic concept of state autonomy would therefore seek to further a politics of quite a different kind than that of parties like the Akali's or the DMK/AIDMK. While each party sought to further its own specific ends and class preferences, their coming together does not make for an opportunist politics. What the situation represented is a condition of what may be called objective complementarity; that is, for a common fight for state rights different parties seek to pursue different political ends given their diverse preferences. This is something unavoidable in a large federal polity like that of India. Therefore the argument that writes off the state autonomy movements for their diverse class and social consequences is mistaken.

Not only will this lead to the development of a better federation in India by making the balance of power between the centre and states more even but it will lead to a more democratic society. More and more decision-making will be decentralised making politics more participatory. Centralisation of power even when formal democratic structures work makes politics remote from the people. Centralisation of power can also give rise to authoritarian tendencies in the working of the state.

The movements for state autonomy became decisive but no major constitutional change could be brought about to give it a permanent shape. One does not know what would have happened if the Janata party had lasted longer. It came to an abrupt end. With the return of the Congress party under Indira Gandhi's leadership with secure majority, the movements for state autonomy slowly receded in the background.

17.3.3 The Phase of Coalition Politics

At the present moment, there is no movement for state autonomy like earlier even though the struggle to get more financial resources for the state continues. In the 1990 a visible change came in the correlation of forces active in the Indian politics. Let us look at that to understand why there is no such movement today. We are all witness to the development of a pattern in Indian politics since 1996 in which the government of the nation-state called India has been made up as much by the political forces and parties having their bases in only one or the other states. No all-India party or what in India are called "national parties" has been successful in providing a government to the country. Conventionally speaking, it is, on the European example, a coalitional pattern. But given the multi-ethnic specificity of India, it is, on a deeper analysis, more than a coalition. It is much more a co-governance of the country by the nation and the regions which make up the nation. What constitutes the Centre at the level of the nation-state is made up as much of those who speak on behalf of and claim to represent the nation as much as those who do so for the various regions. In fact, this configuration has been a result of a long contestation, going back to the early years of Independence, between various forces as to how and by whom will the "nation" be represented; what will be the cultural identity marks of the nation(-state). The result is a slow process towards congealing of the respective claims of the diverse forces representing the nation-state and the different regional states. One cannot do without the other. I am calling it a co-governance in that sense. Now the sense of this will become clear if we compare it with an earlier period in the history of governance in India.

It is quite clear from the above that this period in the 1990s has been marked by a pronounced ascendance of regional parties in a somewhat enduring manner. In the short term (now there is no long term trend that can be analytically discerned in Indian politics), there seem to be no chance of this trend being reversed. But what informs the ascendance of the regional parties is the absence of any overt conflicts or clashes between the centre and the state in India however much of differences of opinions can be shown to exist on any number of issues. What seems to be happening between the centre and state in terms of differences of opinion are in the nature of symbiotic contests. This trend crystallised during the period of the two United Front ministries in 1996-97. Even the BJP with its chauvinistic nationalism and rabid communalism and centralising ideology has been forced to accept the pattern and pay lip service to the code of behaviour entailed within these patterns. Barring a region here and there on the borders, the national unity of India seems to be acquiring deeper roots. It will be an effort of the argument here to look for reasons and some causal chains in the making of this phenomenon.

17.4 SUMMARY

The first time when the regionally based political parties representing the various states or regions of India emerged as a force was in the period 1967-72 (and the pattern repeated itself in the late 1970s as well, though on a relatively smaller scale). Let us here reiterate the first mentioned

period for a contrast, which is revealing in itself. The entire period was marked, as we have seen, by intense (and shrill) struggle between the centre and the states. There also were constant bickering and mutual accusations. The central government charged the regional governments of being against the nation-state; in Indian phraseology, of being a threat to national unity. The state governments accused the centre of becoming authoritarian—both a danger to democratic aspirations and the federal arrangement. Most of the parties ruling in the states—Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Punjab, West Bengal, Tripura, Kashmir and many others went on to produce documents enumerating measures for the protection of the rights of the states and listing details of how the centre has gone on encroaching into the sphere of their jurisdiction and had violated the rights of the states. Each of these governments represented diverse ideological views, class preferences, social bases, and so on. It least bothered them as to how this greater power for the states for which they were fighting would be used by the different states, so long as they would have it for their own purposes. What brought them together against the government of the nation-state was an objective complementarity in spite of different ideological and class preferences as between Tamil Nadu or West Bengal or Punjab and so on.

Today, there is no sharp contradiction between the centre (the nation-state) and the states (regional governments) though there may be many differences of opinion or even conflicts of interests centered around economic and fiscal or monetary policies and on questions of culture and language policies. This situation has altered the terrain of centre-state relations in such a way that there is no scope for a state autonomy movement.

17.5 EXERCISES

- 1) Identify the features of autonomy movements.
- 2) Compare the nature of autonomy movements between the phases of Congress hegemony and the Janata rule.
- 3) Comment on the autonomy movements during the era of coalition politics.

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