

RESEARCH  
ARTICLE



Political India over fifty years

BY

CHAITANYAN DA20017

विद्यया ऽ मृतमश्नुते



एन सी ई आर टी  
NCERT

# ABOUT ARTICLE



Political India over fifty years

N. RAM

Print edition : Aug 09, 1997



# INRODUCTION



- ❖ India in the golden jubilee year of its independence is passing through a time of painful transition.
- ❖ INDIA is one of the most politicised societies in the world: this is as true today, fifty years after Independence, as it was in 1947.
- ❖ The degradation of democratic institutions and frustrations over the failure to solve the problems of mass poverty, socio-economic deprivation on a gigantic scale, various forms of entrenched backwardness, notably illiteracy, communalism, pervasive corruption and criminalisation of politics might have led to cynicism from time to time.
- ❖ This decline and the frustrations surely have something to do with the volatility that has been a defining feature of Indian politics since the mid-1960s.



# Sustained politicisation




- ❖ Sustained politicisation must be recognised as one of the basic strengths of the Indian experience, a function of its democratisation over half a century of Independence.
- ❖ People take their political rights and choice seriously. This is an advantage that India has over several countries which are more developed in several respects, more educated at the base level, and far more prosperous.
- ❖ The fact that, for all its weaknesses, the system that took shape in the post-1947 period seems to be endowed with a certain bottomline of institutional sustainability, if not stability, is a double advantage.

## Sustained politicisation

Nevertheless, recent political events have underlined the fact that India in the golden jubilee year of its Independence is passing through a time of painful transition. The question is - to what? This question cannot be answered without reference to the striking range of conflicts and pressures, some of them apparently malignant, which have over an extended period pulled against the fabric of nationhood, the social order and political stability. These are, of course, inter-related.

Queues at polling booths, 1996. Sustained politicisation must be recognised as one of the basic strengths of the Indian experience, a function of its democratisation over half a century of Independence.

# Problem of separatism



The first is the problem of separatism or secessionism allied with religious fundamentalism or other extremist ideological and social tendencies and committed to militarised or terrorist methods. This ideologically, socially and politically determined problem has brought civil society in the affected States or areas to its knees. The pressure exerted by this phenomenon has waxed and waned over the five decades, sometimes increasing oppressively in response to political authoritarianism, over-centralisation and opportunism.

The second is the phenomenon of politically organised, militant communalism which has been on the march, taking a very high toll and threatening the integrity and basic character of the polity. This phenomenon is expressed in a variety of religious fundamentalist responses, but most menacingly on the national stage by the quite successful building up of the 'Hindutva' or 'Hindu Rashtra' platform by aggressive Hindu chauvinists, the saffron brigade, since the mid-1980s.

# Caste system



The third is related to the deeply damaging features of, and the pressure and social strife that have built around, the caste system. Although not unchanging, this system, which is bolstered by landlordism and seeped in semi-feudal values and ideas of a most retrograde kind, continues to have a malignant durability. It exemplifies social oppression, inequality and injustice in a way that cannot be escaped. The widespread demand for 'social justice' and the social divisions and strife that seem, at times, to overwhelm the democratic polity arise from this situation.

Dalit victims of caste-related violence in Bihar. The caste system, which is bolstered by landlordism and seeped in semi-feudal values and ideas of a most retrograde kind, continues to have a malignant durability.



# Cooperative federalism



The fourth issue that cannot be escaped relates to the working of 'cooperative federalism', and more specifically Centre-State relations, on which both national unity and political stability depend vitally in a political sense.

If India is to do well in the intermediate future, these challenges have to be responded to in a much more imaginative way than we have witnessed over the past decade and a half.

FOR most of the fifty years, India has been ruled by one party, the Congress, by virtue first of its leadership role in the freedom struggle and, secondly, because of the absence of coherent alternatives at the all-India level. But that political hegemony, seriously challenged and eroded as early as 1967, came to a decisive end in the late-1980s and we are into a new chapter.



# General elections (1989, 1991 and 1996)



The last three general elections (1989, 1991 and 1996) have underlined the fact that the Indian polity is divided three ways, making a majority government virtually impossible and dictating, for now and the foreseeable future, coalition arrangements involving some common positions and approaches but much discord and expediency. The three political 'formations' or groupings which may be identified as the national level players are: the Congress and its (mostly minor) allies; the BJP and its Maharashtra-based ally, the Shiv Sena, plus a small emerging new group of regional players such as the Akali Dal and the Samata Party; and the ideologically and politically disparate but interesting United Front. Any Central government must, of necessity, come from one, or a combination, of these broad 'formations'.

# The Congress



The Congress(I) is still the only party in the system which is truly trans-regional, which has a presence on the ground in every part of the country. Its resilience and capacity to cling to power or to stage comebacks are not to be underestimated. There are certain signs that under the stewardship of Sitaram Kesri, it has been able to achieve a kind of organisational resurgence, or at least functionality, which places it in a position of advantage relative to the United Front and the minority Government it offers the polity.

Nevertheless, what stands out is the massive political space the Congress has vacated over the past decade or more. From the time of Independence, popular support for this party has declined by some 15 percentage points at the all-India level, with the erosion being significantly higher in key States such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu.

# Hindu fundamentalism



THE second major trend in the polity has been the relative success of the forces of Hindu fundamentalism, or communalism, in a populous part of the country. It is they, and not the secular alternatives, that have made an aggressive and effective play for the space vacated in these vital arenas of northern and western India by the Congress.

In quantitative terms, the defining fact is this: between 1984 and 1991, the BJP as a party climbed, in two steep steps, from a one-fourteenth share to a fifth share of the national popular vote. Now, with its allies, it seems perched at a one-fourth share. Any further climb towards the strategic one-third mark could bring the BJP and its allies dangerously close to power at the Centre.



## CONCLUSION

THE third force must stand or fall by the quality and effectiveness of the stand it takes on the major issues that have come to the fore in the Indian political arena fifty years after Independence. These issues are:

political corruption on an unimaginable scale, combining with the criminalisation of politics; the set of issues raised by the post-1991 economic policies; the challenge to national unity posed by communalism as a political mobilisation strategy; the threat of separatist movements backed, to some extent, from abroad; the challenge of social justice; the need for federalism and State autonomy; the need to do well in the areas of basic education, public health and meeting basic needs of the masses of the people; and external pressures on India's foreign policy.