CHAPTER 3

IMPORTANCE OF PARTY-BASED ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS (PRIs)

Studies of social and political events in India cannot be made in isolation of electoral politics and the multi-party electoral system. Competitive elections at periodic intervals have spurred dynamic interactions between the society and the polity. The electoral system termed as a periodic political activity for shaping, consolidating and renovating both the society and the polity is the perennial watchdog of democracy. Compared to Western countries, elections are a relatively new institution in India but the country became experienced in conducting free and fair regular elections soon after the concept was introduced. The regularity and autonomy of the election process in the country explains the survival of its political democracy. Mass participation in the election process has transformed the Indian state from feudal to republican. Representative democracy and extension of franchise to the entire adult population were principles that originated in cultures foreign to India yet they became the preferred instruments of social and political change and the principles of governance and popular sovereignty in the country post independence.

The nucleus of political power changed as a result of elections. Subaltern groups in many regions and localities of India was successful in challenging the political prominence and control of resources by social groups to which the British transferred power in 1947 and gain access to political power. The incentive of participation in the electoral contest was electoral dividends gained in the executive as well as the legislative wing of the government. There are innumerable instances throughout the world when mass movements have forced the hands of federal governments through electoral mobilization.

Indian politics on the whole with the exception of a brief authoritarian interlude during the Emergency imposed in 1975-77, has remained steadfast in its commitment to electoral democracy. Mass elections in India have successfully accelerated the process of interaction between politics and society. In post-colonial India, on the one hand, power was transferred to a national movement that thereafter became the ruling elite, on the other hand economic transition that accompanied
universal adult franchise in other contemporary democracies failed to take off here. The new rulers of post-independent India sought to generate legitimacy for their regime through mass participation in elections ignoring the need for redistribution of economic resources. As Mitra and Singh (1999) observed "there were occasions when a lingering doubt crossed the minds of the masses that electoral politics involved cumulating of voting strength and aggressive power play for the promotion of certain vested interests."

But on the whole the electoral process in India has had a considerable functional significance for the voters as well as for the political system. To the electorate it imparted a remarkable degree of political efficacy and an orientation towards a democratic political system. The election process provided a vantage point from where to review the legitimacy and efficacy of the political process. Samuel J. Eldersveld and Bashiruddin Ahmed, two surveyors of Indian mass political culture and behavior observed, "The realization that the peasant who has never left his village dominates as the political activist cadre is most impressive." The functional significance of elections for the political system in India lies in their contribution to mass politicization, interactions through democratic confrontation across social crevasses rooted in elite-mass, rural-urban, religious, caste, class and other differentiations. Public participation in the regular elections is a safeguard against the complacency of the ruling elite. Consent through voting in the election process cannot be taken for granted in perpetuity in democratic systems. There is always the lurking threat of intervention by the vigilant electorate which keeps the political elite on their toes.

ELECTORAL MOBILIZATION IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

According to Mahendra Singh (1997) political participation and electoral mobilization of the masses in India has passed through 3 roughly identifiable phases: 1) the nationalist movement and the early post independence period, 2) the period between the mid 1950s and mid 1960s and that 3) between mid 1960s and the 1970s. His crucial observations on the electoral mobilization of the various sections of the Indian electorate give us an idea about the phases of integration and inclusion of the various social strata into the political fabric of the country. Atul Kohli (2001) commenting on the success of democratic elections in India attributed it to the power
distribution in the Indian society and its ability to negotiate and renegotiate. Kohli identified three phases of democracy in India – those of democratic origin, democratic consolidation and democratic deepening that involved role of the political elite in the early half of the twentieth century, the embrace of democratic institutions by the political public that included opposition elites and organized groups in the period after independence and the incorporation of the masses in the democratic system later on.14

Singh and Saxena15 (2008) identified four different phases from the escalation of the movement for India’s independence to the inclusion of the common masses. They were the ‘pre-cursive phase’, the ‘mass nationalist phase’ when common men and women participated in the freedom movement, the ‘ruralizing election phase’ and the ‘deinstitutionalizing phase’. The present study will take into account the observations made by Singh, Kohli and Singh and Saxena for identifying the three phases of electoral mobilization.

THE FIRST PHASE

The institutions of election and party system in India originated in the colonial set-up. Social and religious awakening preceded political consciousness of the masses in the country. The social forces behind the first political movement i.e. the nationalist movement were the English-educated urban and urbanized mostly middle class and upper caste elements that pioneered in creating political organizations that subsequently merged to form the Indian National Congress in 1885. The Congress gradually transformed itself from a pressure group within the framework of colonial administration to a nationalist force to gain independence from colonial rule. Other political organizations and movements also emerged with varying degrees of mass support and organizational prowess to speak for all Indian communities, classes and regions. This is referred as the ‘pre-cursive phase by Singh and Saxena (2008).15

The political stratification system in the pre-independence era was almost a mirror image of the social stratification system. Though Singh and Saxena (2008) referred to it as the ‘mass nationalist phase’16 perhaps referring to the increased number of masses in the freedom movement with the majority of masses belonging to middle and lower middle class and the middle castes but the leadership of the political organizations and compositions of Legislative Councils and Assemblies – first based on nominations by the British Indian authorities and subsequently combined with elections by a restricted franchise – remained with and comprised mainly the upper
strata (class as well as caste) of the society (Singh, 1997). The socially and economically backward classes were mostly left out from the electoral process. Politics during this phase was the exclusive realm of those who enjoyed high status and privilege in the social set-up and had the advantages of access to English education and opportunities of social mobility provided by it. Writers like Barrington Moore (1966) termed India’s national movement as a “bourgeois revolution” because of the dominant involvement of the economic elites in the political movement. The lateral movement from upper echelons of the social structure to the upper hierarchy of the political system created a deep chasm and inequality in the social and political sphere.

Post independence, the urban middle class professionals and business elite who dominated the nationalist movement continued their dominance. In terms of caste composition of the post-independence political elite, the upper castes, already enjoying economic and political predominance, dominated the newly formed administrative bodies despite their numerical weakness vis-à-vis the lower castes (Singh, 1997).

The rural social structure comprised a top stratum of landlords, moneylenders and Brahmin purohits, a middle band of reasonably well off landed peasants and at the bottom were the majority poor land-less labourers. Social mobilization and politicization of the masses under the tutelage of urban social and political elite rarely penetrated the upper and lower strata of the village community in the pre-independence period due to different reasons. The upper strata in the villages chose to ignore the nationalist messages and seek their own economic benefit in colonial loyalty while the lower strata were primarily overlooked by the urban elites. The nationalist messages met with receptivity from the middle band only (Singh, 1997).

Following independence especially since the introduction of competitive elections based on universal adult franchise, the political penetration into the countryside made rapid headway. The higher echelons of the primarily feudal rural society who were allegiance to the colonial rulers and kept away from the nationalist movement now hurried to ride the ruling party bandwagon that in turn welcomed them for electoral success. Weiner (1967) pointed out the ruling Congress party built its political networks with the support of powerful members of the society — the landowning and the upper castes — exchanging state patronage for electoral mobilization. The entry of these elements into the ruling party and their rise through electoral success did not
produce any visible social change in the rural society as the mobilization of the lower castes comprising the majority of the Indian poor was still in an infant stage.\textsuperscript{20}

THE SECOND PHASE

Alistair McMillan\textsuperscript{21} in his study on the ‘Electoral Behavior in India’ discussed at length the extent to which socio-economic identity (particularly class, caste, and religion) shaped voting behavior in the country. The most notable development of the second phase, according to Singh\textsuperscript{22}, was the rise of the economically backward classes through electoral mobilization. The political mobilization of the sizeable backward caste peasantry had started during the nationalist movement. Thus the seed of ‘democratic origin’ as suggested by Kohli (2001) was entrenched. Post-independence, in the context of electoral politics, the politicization of the backward castes accelerated and intensified politics, and started to acquire a participatory trait. Singh and Saxena (2008) called it the ‘ruralizing election’ phase.\textsuperscript{23}

The gradual rise of the landed peasantry at the expense of the upper caste landlords came to manifest itself on economic as well as political planes. While the economic rise of owner-cultivators was characteristic of both upper and middle castes, the political rise was more characteristic of the latter. In fact in this phase the upper castes were driven to the ‘wings’ of the political stage by the numerically dominant middle castes whose political ascendancy can be greatly attributed to their agriculture-based prosperity.\textsuperscript{24} The upper caste clusters that dominated the nationalist movement led by the Indian National Congress retained their dominant status in the Congress party post-independence. The ascendant backward castes that felt inclined to join the Congress, which enjoyed a hegemonic status at that point\textsuperscript{25}, usually found their way blocked by the upper castes. This relative blockade turned them towards the various opposition parties who were more receptive to them. After having made their political impact felt by helping build fast growing opposition parties and thereby a truly democratic political system\textsuperscript{26}, the backward castes now found the Congress Party more than willing to open up and accommodate them, to prevent its own decline.\textsuperscript{27} Thus political parties sought to adapt themselves to the changes in social hierarchy for electoral gains. The earlier political preponderance of the upper castes was undercut by the now dominant middle classes in the regional and local politics as well. The growing political participation of these classes through elections and the electoral
gains in the aftermath ensured that political parties dependent on election victories for their existence also fell back on them. The introduction and integration of newer elements into the political system consolidated the democratic foundation of the country.\textsuperscript{28}

THE THIRD PHASE

According to Singh (1997)\textsuperscript{29} the most notable characteristic of the third phase of electoral mobilization was the politicization of the lowest stratum of the society, ethnically predominantly the ‘harijans’ (the socially untouchables) and occupationally predominantly the agricultural labourers. The political mobilization of these deprived groups is by no means an entirely new phenomenon. These groups formed part of the electoral politics arithmetic right from the beginning of India’s electoral movement. However, whereas these downtrodden and distraught groups had earlier formed the manipulated sections in the political hierarchy, controlled by the economically dominant upper and middle castes, they now assumed independent political postures and challenged the dominance of the upper castes. This disintegrated the erstwhile political patron and benefactor system to a significant extent.\textsuperscript{30}

The extension of franchise to the whole adult population empowered the peripheral social groups and enriched the existing political resources, deepening the democratic existence of the state (Kohli, 2001). The empowerment of the lower social orders through institutionalized elections has been described by Mitra and Singh as the transformation from vertical mobilization into horizontal and differential mobilization.\textsuperscript{31} As the social groups located at the periphery discovered the negotiable value of a vote, they started participating directly in the political process that commensurate electoral power with dispensable resources.\textsuperscript{32} After the initial uncertainty over the ability of autonomous political participation, the bottom rung of the social order crossed the participatory threshold and became politically relevant.\textsuperscript{33} They moved out of the political tutelage of the locally dominant upper and middle caste leaders and became available for direct political mobilization by political parties and their representatives. Their political clout increased and several viable opportunities opened up for these hitherto untouchables in the various spheres of social and political life. The new generation harijan leadership was assertive and carried a significant amount of political weight in the elections. The political parties
observing the infinite possibilities of growing harijan political participation put into service this new social input for electoral success.\textsuperscript{34}

This phase of electoral mobilization was marked by the greatest amount of conflict. It was referred to as the ‘deinstitutionalizing phase’ by Singh and Saxena (2008).\textsuperscript{35} The updated status of the ‘harijans’ in the social hierarchy and their newfound political importance created intense cognitive dissonance for the upper and middle caste clusters who had till then always resisted aspirations and strivings of the lower castes. This prompted some vested political interest to lay emphasis on consensus building during local elections rather than competition.\textsuperscript{36}

Modern political ideologies like institutionalization of the election process and competitive party politics spurred the erstwhile bottom rungs of the social structure to assert themselves, and exercise their rights. This was evident from their active political participation in the various elections. Competitive elections also helped to integrate different power strata in a sharply stratified and multi-layered society like the one in India. Electoral politics brought about certain social changes though the extent and manner of change may not have been ideal.

\textbf{ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS}

Elections and political parties are political institutions that have played crucial roles in democratizing post-colonial societies. The complex mechanism of modern electoral systems would have found it difficult to operate without well-organized political parties especially in a diverse society like the one in India. Representative democracies would operate like market places in the absence of well-disciplined political parties. One of the important tasks of political parties is to create order out of chaotic public opinion. Mitra and Singh (1999)\textsuperscript{37} observed “a dynamic and self-reinforcing party system facilitates democratic accountability.” Political parties are important link between the citizens and the state. The party system is a crucial link between the processes in society and the policy makers. Political parties are the first to register issues affecting the interests of various social groups. The integrative ability of the party system has successfully carried out the political mobilization of a population divided on the lines of language, region, caste and religion in India.

Democratic elections have deepened the roots of competitive party system in India. A competitive party system provides the crucial backdrop to political articulation of competing interests.\textsuperscript{38} Political parties create opportunities for various

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social groups to engage in competition for allocation of scarce public resources and assert their collective identity.

There is a close relationship between the electoral system and the party system. The prevailing electoral system in a country influences the system of governance as well as the structure, organization and discipline in its political parties. The electoral system affects the political life of a country mainly through the political parties. The Indian political elite adopted the simple majority electoral system because of its simplicity for the illiterate mass electorate. Any complex electoral system was considered unsuitable for the Indian situation. Many observers are of the opinion that as the simple majority electoral system helps to maintain superiority of the political structure over the political parties it strengthens the democratic process (Eldersveld and Ahmed 1978; Palmer 1975).

The party system and universal adult franchise has bolstered political mobilization of all sections of society in India. The transition from hierarchical set-up in the colonial times to the egalitarian system post independence was feasible because of the institutionalization of universal adult franchise and a competitive party system. These two political institutions raised the political consciousness of the electorate. The introduction of universal adult franchise and the extension of the right to vote to social groups devoid of any prior political involvement created a new political resource. The right to vote through secret ballot exercised at a polling booth conveniently located in the village boosted political participation. The right to vote without coercion from political and social elite successfully challenged social dominance of the privileged. The pace of social change was accelerated with the introduction of new social forces into the political arena, through social reforms initiated by the newly elected representatives of the hitherto backward classes and through political mobilization by electoral participation. This led to the stability of the Indian political system. The democratization process at the local level through elections ended one-sided domination of the upper castes and grassroots became avid players in the political arena.

**PEOPLE PARTICIPATION IN THE PANCHAYAT ELECTIONS**

Electoral behavior and political perception and their impact are of considerable significance to a country committed to planned social change through the ballot paper. Elections to the local bodies i.e. the Panchayati Raj Institutions
(PRIs), the primary units of democratic participation, provided a new challenge to the Indian political system. The panchayati raj elections brought to the fore new power forces that would determine the extent and depth of politicization of the rural electorate.

Elections involve people in the democratic process of voting and choosing their representatives. In the process of casting a vote, people know they are making their choice among different aspirants of power. Elections to the grass-root institutions wherein the voters can actually see whom they are choosing are significant as they serve as training ground for both voters and leaders. The involvement in the decision-making process in the PRIs would demonstrate to the grassroots the importance of democratic election. The electorate can internalize the fact that local elections are not the process of leadership recruitment but a process of effectively controlling the local leadership. The power of removing the incumbent leadership and anointing an alternative lies with them in their collective capacity. This is an extension of the power potential that an ordinary voter enjoys in a democratic set-up and could be more palpable in the local set-up. The political activity of voting once in every 5 years cannot be equivalent to political participation. It is when the voters exercise their power in the participatory democracy at the grass-root level, as in the panchayat bodies that the voting process evolves from a periodic ritual to a functional weapon.

As an embodiment of local governance panchayati raj entails two vital elements a) local autonomy i.e. real and effective powers in the hands of local representatives and b) local democracy i.e. sharing of political power by local people through participation in local elections and decision-making. The Panchayati Raj Institutions gave an institutional basis to both these conditions for realizing grass-root participation and empowerment.

The post-independence policy-makers belonging to the dominant party introduced Panchayati raj as it offered them political mileage without much change in the existing political, economic and social structure. The policy drew criticism from writers like Moore (1966) who considered structural change as a pre-condition of participatory democracy and development. The implementation of the Balvantray Mehta Committee’s recommendations of a three-tier local self-government therefore failed to boost local democracy. Local democracy and PRIs regained hope with the formation of a non-Congress government for the first time in India post independence.
in 1977. The new rulers addressed the grass-root aspiration of democratic set-up by appointing the Asoka Mehta Committee. This Committee suggested ways and means on how best the institutions of Panchayati raj could be geared to answer the problems of decentralization and empowerment. Following the recommendations of this Committee several state governments like West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh initiated the process of holding elections to the local bodies. (See the previous Chapter of this study.)

However at the same time many state governments laid emphasis on the unanimous elections of the panches and the sarpanch (head) at the Gram panchayat level and on keeping the political parties out of local politics. Little heed was paid to the view that it was both futile and undesirable to either encourage unanimity or make efforts to keep political parties out of the election process. The participation of political parties was a reality and it was not feasible to seclude the political parties from the arena of local politics and was detrimental to the Indian political structure that extended from Gram sabha to the Lok sabha. Moreover it was observed when political parties were not allowed to participate in the panchayat elections they sought to manipulate the electoral system in a clandestine way. So it was best that political parties entered the arena of local politics and contested the local elections. The Asoka Mehta Committee (1978) vehemently recommended the active participation of political parties in the panchayat election process.

The entry of national political parties in the panchayat elections helped in the secularization of the local election process and reined in petty factionalism based on caste, religion and narrow group loyalties rampant in most Indian villages. The rationale behind uncontested elections at the gram panchayat level was that there was need for collective effort for maintaining peace within the confines of the villages. The dominant political party (Congress) supported the unanimously elected panchayats because it wanted to retain its political supremacy in the panchayats. Few state governments aided the process by instituting monetary inducements for unanimous elections to the local bodies. With a view of receiving these special grants, efforts were made in many villages to see that its electorate was somehow successful in electing their panches (the panchayat member) and sarpanch (the panchayat head) unopposed. This was unusual particularly when it is not unknown that factionalism due to the differences in class, caste and religion perennially inflicted Indian villages and there was constant rift between the numerically superior
middle and lower classes and the privileged upper classes. Contrived unanimity stifled the right to articulate independent opinion and strengthened the hold of vested interests in the village panchayats.50

A dynamic local democracy was necessary for the evolution of participatory democratic process. The existence of local democracy is dependent on the existence of local electoral competition. As the Mehta Committee51 pointed out "If competitive party politics was kept out of the local elections it was abandonment of hard political realities in favor of utopian ideals." Political parties play active role in the mobilization of public opinion on various issues, aggregating common interests and articulating them at the local level as well as relating them to national politics. As Grover (1989)52 observed campaigns by political parties before every election educate the people on various policies pursued by the governments and since panchayati raj extends to the remotest village therefore political education is extended to the villagers' therein." One of the main purposes of Panchayati raj is to involve maximum number of people in the process of political mobilization and direct the potentialities of the rural masses in the direction of development activities.53

Political participation does not end once a person casts his vote. For most Indian voters, politics did not involve anything more than voting till a couple of decades ago. The PRIs have been successful in bringing the rural population into the mainstream of political activity and creating in them a sense of involvement in nation-building tasks. The panchayat bodies have been made an integral part of the development activities at the grass-root level. PRIs ensure people's participation in the local political and development process that leads to their political and economic empowerment.

In the wake of participatory democracy ushered in by Panchayati raj, people are linked to national and state-level policy-makers through the panchayat members and the panchayat members in their capacity as representatives of the rural electorate are able to exert influence on the decision-making process. The participation of the Panchayati raj functionaries in the decision-making process give an idea to the masses about the democratic process and the development policies adopted at the national and state level.

Since the panchayat leadership plays an important role in the rural areas and are considered 'agents of social change'54 the national and regional policy-makers have to keep fingers on the pulse of these functionaries. The political parties keen to
utilize the power and clout of the local panchayat leadership in their electoral objectives accord PRI leaders elite status in the rural areas which has in some way impeded the process of grass-root political empowerment. But there is no escaping the fact that the panchayat leaders are key communicators in the political process and effective and efficient media of rural development and therefore cannot be ignored or bypassed.

Democracy and universal adult franchise gave various social groups and sectional interests the legal right to participate in elections. Competitive elections at the gram panchayat level ensured a certain degree of power to the grass-root people. Political empowerment gave new life to the hitherto vulnerable social forces and ensured that these vulnerable and marginal groups initiated viable changes in the social, political and economic structure. They infused newer political resources into the Indian political system. The political empowerment process has been more successful in places where a comprehensive and competitive election system has successfully integrated the local and national experience. The experimentation in local democracy has been the least successful in those regions where no persistent attempt was made by the regional administration to integrate the grassroots in public policy framework. Local democracy was most effective when local institutions were involved in the local affairs and politically accountable to the local electorate. Frequent and competitive political participation of the local electorate is crucial to the viability and efficacy of local governance.

The role of local politics in the expansion of political democracy and ensuring the smooth functioning of various political and social subsystems at the grass-root level cannot be overlooked. Local institutions like the PRIs, local political processes like the panchayat elections and local leadership like the panchayat leaders are the ultimate interface between the State and its people.

This dependence on the panchayat leaders for political involvement of the local people by national and regional political parties has had certain detrimental effects. The political parties bypassed the masses and directly interacted with the local leaders. The local leaders were happy to act as interpreters and links between political parties and ordinary voters. But this alienated the masses and led to the lack of accountability and transparency among local leaders. The local leaders have utilized the opportunity of direct interaction with political leaders and used the local bodies as
springboards for higher political positions ignoring their duties and responsibilities in the panchayats.

But all these problems notwithstanding the fact remains that the panchayat system has penetrated into the core of rural life and is a medium in the politicization process of the rural masses. The PRIs and the panchayat elections have successfully involved the rural masses in the mainstream of the political process. Panchayat elections have given rise to local leaders with whom the grassroots can enter into a dialogue without the intervening bureaucratic screen. For the political parties, the local political elite (meaning the panchayat members) speaking local political idiom have become the most effective interpreters and communicators of policies from above and is inevitable for electoral success. The political complexion of regional and national politics is dependent on the political affiliation of the leaders connected with local bodies, as voter loyalties to these local leaders are relatively stable.\textsuperscript{60} It is a common truth that whichever political party gets majority in panchayat elections not only controls the local administration but also wields wider political power in the concerned area. On the flip side the local leaders try to bargain with the higher echelons of the ruling party for the development of the locality which augers well for the villagers as well as for the new found importance, influence and power of these leaders.\textsuperscript{61}

Decentralization of power ensures that local problem gains eminence and empowerment of grassroots become a reality. It is a difficult job to sustain the local democratic electoral and political system considering the fact that there are certain undemocratic roots ensconced within the rural society. The institutionalization of local politics within the structure of panchayati raj ensures the preservation of political democracy for the rural voters.

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