Chapter V

POWER ELITE AND SOCIETY
IN INDIA

The concepts of elite, ruling class, and power elite as defined by Pareto, Mosca and Mills, respectively, have influenced all over the world the studies of the wielders of power in relation to their society and culture. The word 'elite' implies a plurality of top groups. For Mills the concept of power elite is quite a broad one as he includes in his definition the top ones from different fields of social life such as the celebrities, the very rich, the chief executives, the corporate rich, the warlords etc.1 The purpose of this chapter is to work out a workable definition of power elite and to discuss the elite and the class approaches to political power in relation to the present study of power elite in Sikar district of Rajasthan.

Defining Operationally the Power Elite

In the present study an operational definition of power elite is being worked out to understand and analyse the nature of power politics at the district level in Rajasthan. The concept of power elite implies in this study the higher circles in the game of political power. The power elite are located in the structures and organisations of political parties and district administration and government. The
definition given by Mills which includes political, economic and military men as power elite is found partly relevant. However, the idea that the power elite emanate from the top status levels of the society seems to be quite useful in the present study. It is necessary to understand the social and economic backgrounds of the men of power in order to understand the distribution of social power.

Mills' view that men from high places may be ideological representatives of the poor and humble\(^2\) seems to be true in the Indian situation particularly about social workers and activists involved in ultra-radical movements. The view that men of humble origin, brightly self-made may serve the most vested and inherited interests applies to a good number of the present-day Indian politicians specifically representing the rural people and weaker sections of society in local self-governmental institutions and legislative bodies. Some politicians in India serve the interests of particular sections of society. There are some top decision-makers having expert knowledge of the political field in India.

The history of Indian elections demonstrates clearly that severe defeats and glorious victories of political parties have not significantly altered economic policies and institutions and defence strategies. This is also true at the local level as defeat or victory of candidates of particular parties would not change the administrative setup
and economic policies in any significant manner. The recent coalition government at the centre and in some states like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat etc. has thrown up some new issues regarding centre-state relations, and national-regional leadership.

The main thrust of the present study is to understand the phenomenon of political power at the district level and to establish its linkages with block and village levels on the one hand, and with the state level power structure on the other. The study comprises of both the political decision makers in the governmental institutions such as the Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads and Municipal Committees and government and semi-government agencies and in the political parties. It would be, however, difficult for us to establish clear links between the two, but a rudimentary analysis in this regard will be attempted in the present study.

The study of political power focuses on institutionalized political leadership. Political leadership has legitimacy in a given situation, in prescribing a course of action and in mobilization of the people in regard to the prescribed action. The emergence of political leadership in India can be attributed to three historical and contemporary factors: (1) India's freedom struggle, (2) India's Independence, and (3) socio-political and cultural movements. The
freedom struggle provided not only national political leadership because of the anti-colonial stance, it also drew support from different sections of society under these leaders. The attaining of freedom ensued a new political era by providing a Constitution, a self-government and a chain of political institutions from national to local level. The creation of such a politico-legal system inevitably generated layers and levels of political leadership in India. Finally, cultural, ethnic, social, tribal, and agrarian movements articulating demands and aspirations of weaker sections, minorities, women, rural and urban poor have thrown up new leadership enjoying support of the people. Some of these leaders joined political parties and contested elections.

Approaches to the study of political power in India

Two main approaches to the study of political power have been reported in the Indian context. Andre Beteille in the mid-1960s distinguished between 'rule' and 'dominance', and dealt primarily with the 'ruling elite' (rule) rather than the 'dominant class' (dominance). Thus, the ruling elite for Beteille consist of people who are involved in major governmental and administrative decisions, and the dominant class consists of those in whose interests such decisions are taken and whose power they help to sustain. Such a sharing of power by power elite and dominant class
seems to suggest a conspirational device by the two. This also negates the very distinction which Beteille has drawn between rule and dominance.

Thus, the two approaches are: (1) elite approach, and (2) class approach. The distinction between the two must rest necessarily on the contradiction and non-congruence of interests and activities pursued by them. However, more important is undermining the significance of the class approach to the study of political power. In fact, Beteille makes out dichotomous distinctions rather than formulation of continua. He suggests distinctions such as political and non-political elite, bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic elite. The non-bureaucratic elite would include professionals, intellectuals, literary and creative writers, business executives, etc.

**The Elite Approach**

The elite approach to the study of power elite is reflected in several other writings of the 1960s and the 1970s. In most of the studies of this period power elite is seen as a product of its caste background and one dominant party system. Elite is understood in most of these studies as a macro-phenomenon found mostly at national and state levels. F.G. Bailey in a study of Orissa distinguished between an 'elite arena' of politics and a 'village
arena'. The former is that of the state government and it is modern, whereas a village arena is traditional. Though, Bailey undermines linkages between the village and the state arenas of politics, elsewhere he mentions about 'bridge actions' between tribe, caste and nation. It is increasingly realised now that national and state politics can filter down to district, block and village level politics, and local politics gets reflected quite often in state and national politics.

Paul R Brass in his major study of factional politics in the Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh finds that the high caste ex-tenants of the zamindars and taluqdars and the petty and middle ex-zamindars are the major sources of support for the Congress Party in the four rural districts studied by him. Control of land and of local government and cooperative institutions are the major instruments of political power in the hands of these groups. However, the situation has changed a great deal in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and some other states because of the emergence of middle and lower castes and groups in positions of power. More than the economic strength of the power groups today it is numerical preponderance and primordial mobilization that matters in having access to positions of political power.
The Class Approach

The class approach emphasises on interaction between those who command economic resources facilitating power, and those who are without resources and are at the mercy of the dominant class. It becomes, therefore, essential in the class approach to have an estimation of the societal resources and command over them and the mechanisms and processes by which the resources are transformed into political power. The basic assumption in this approach is that the dominant class is also the dominant power elite.

In a recent study Rajendra Singh refers to the class and elite approaches and prefers to choose the latter for a study of rural elite in Basti district of U.P. He identifies two types of elites which he terms as 'established elite' and 'emerging elite'. The former are seen in terms of criteria applicable to positions of power in the pre-independence period, and the later are seen as a consequence of major structural changes after independence. The emerging elite signify the role of social, political and economic factors, hence class approach is quite complicated in regard to this particular category of elites. Since Singh has opted for the elite approach, his analysis mainly centres around the historical, social, and cultural aspects of the established elites particularly before independence and to some extent after independence.
Another important study of modern elites by Suren Navlakha\textsuperscript{11} emphasises the role of education in particular and the positions of considerable power and responsibility which they occupy in administrative, professional, business and educational institutions, in general. The main argument in Navlakha's study is that the differential connection of the upper and the lower castes with land, capital and labour which formed the basis of power hierarchy has changed considerably and it has been replaced by modern education and professionalism. However, more important in the study taken up by Suren Navlakha is not only the income and the occupational background of the elites, their religion, caste, region, and education in particular are important factors in the making of elites in Indian society. There is a process of elite-making, and it is dependent upon basic structural change which takes place in a society over a time. From the above accounts it is evident that the elite approach to the study of power supersedes the class approach though the demarcating line between the two is quite thin and blurred.

**Dynamics of Power Elite in India since Independence**

Rajni Kothari, Rudolph and Rudolph, Morris Jones and some other scholars\textsuperscript{12} analysed power elite mainly in terms of two factors: (1) tradition and modernity syndrome; and (2) the political party system. Rajni Kothari observes that there was a small elite having homogeneous social back-
ground, coming mainly from upper caste English educated families and constituted almost one class ensemble. Opposition groups also emerged from this class. There was a loose continua of elites based on governmental power and authority and political parties at various levels. Political factions therefore emerged as a result of intra-party dissidence. Besides the Congress Party no other political party had a composite image and nationwide identity. The D.M.K., the Akali Dal, and the Communist Party in the early years after Independence and the parties like the Swatantra and the Jan Sangh had narrow and regional character. Thus, there were national level power elites, and the regional elites enjoying national recognition. Isolation, fragmentation and realignment characterised the process of counter elite formation in the fifties and the sixties. Upto the mid 1960s the elites of the dominant Congress Party spelled out the parameters of power. This particular period can be characterised in terms of the legacy of the freedom struggle and the dominance of Jawaharlal Nehru's influence in power politics.¹³

a) The Dominant Party Thesis

The well known American political scientist Myron Weiner¹⁴ also observes that the single most important institution in India through which new participants, both elite and masses, have entered the political system is the Con-
gress Party. But Weiner also finds that at least four major social groups have a significant bearing on Congress Party recruitment and whose patterns of political activity have changed during the 1950's. (1) There are the powerful local elites who have had a virtual monopoly over both political authority and land. Maharajas, Zamindars, Watandars, Jagirdars and other titled power-holders exercised power in the village, the taluq, the district and the State. The influence of these elites was felt by the ruling party in administration. Many of these ex-feudal interests have lost their significance, and some have joined openly electoral politics. The Congress Party in Rajasthan in particular has absorbed many of the ruling families and ex-rulers and large landholders in its fold. However, some have joined the opposition parties in the State. (2) A second type of political elite includes the urban professional classes, the journalists, the lawyers, the academicians, and the administrators. These elites supported the national movement against the Raj, hence they had some influence after independence. (3) Before independence a small landholding rural gentry in the countryside and the Bania merchants in the towns became active in the national movement. These elites belong mainly to dominant castes such as Reddis and Kammas, Nadars, Lingayats, and Jats in particular. In the late 1960s these were the rising castes and new participants in politics. Today in most of the states these rising castes
of the sixties have established themselves and entrenched into centre stage of politics in most Indian states. (4) Lastly, a section of political elite has come from lower castes and classes as a result of ideologies of some political parties. The communist parties have attracted leadership from factory workers and peasantry. The Swatantra Party attracted the traders and shopkeepers. Some regional parties such as the Bhartiya Kranti Dal (BKD) drew local elites from the peasants.

However, there was no uniform pattern of elite-recruitment and mass political participation. The study of Kaira district in Gujarat, Belgaum in Karnataka, Guntur in Andhra Pradesh by Myron Weiner shows differential patterns and clearly indicates the emergence of peasant proprietors of middle and upper castes (but not Brahmans) in the elite arena. The local power elite is today coming up from the soil. He is not a super imposition of the external forces. The local power structure is itself in flux, infected by internal factional conflicts, and there is nothing like one party dominant power elite.

During this period a lot of writings emerged on modern elites in India. A good number of these writings were influenced by C. Wrights Mills magnum opus -- The Power Elite. It was also realised that the relationship between elites and classes was important to understand transforma-
tion of Indian society. The role of bureaucracy particularly with regard to the implementation of policies and programmes set by power elite was also considered necessary. But in most of these analyses during this period, hegemony of the Congress Party was the single most important frame of reference. It was also a period of challenge to the traditional elite groups characterised by Brahaminic prescriptions. The upsurge of political parties, and local cultures had become the basis of formation of power elite. In all these analyses the tradition-modernity divide was reflected as a persisting feature.

It may be mentioned here that since the seventies more specifically from 1967 onwards a new perception regarding recruitment and formation of power elite has come up clearly relegating the traditional elite and one-party dominance thesis in the background.\(^{16}\) In pursuance of the tradition-modernity syndrome and one-party domination thesis, studies of the social background of the power elite such as the council of ministers, members of parliament and state legislatures, dominants of the political parties, and power elites of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes were conducted in the late 1960s and 1970s by several political scientists and sociologists.\(^{17}\)
b) The Demystification of the Tradition-Modernity Syndrome

Since the Congress Party lost power in more than half of the states in 1967 elections, the tradition-modernity syndrome thesis witnessed a severe jolt. The emergence of the middle caste dominant peasantry in political arena marked the emergence of regional elites replacing the old upper caste elites in several Indian states. In fact, 1967 elections can be considered as a significant epochal change in the history of post-independent India in the political domain.

The political situation in India has witnessed multi-linear and multidimensional changes with new actors and mobilizations in the political arena. Rural to urban and urban to urban, and to some extent rural to rural and urban to rural migrations have upset electoral projections and calculations. In 1951, the urban population was 17 per cent of the total population which has today become nearly one-third of the total population of India. In place of the national policies and issues the regional, the sub-regional, and the local interests and concerns are being voiced as more significant and in fact are viewed more relevant for acquiring positions of power. Hence, understanding of the regional and the local elites becomes quite important. The emergence of political parties such as the DMK, AIADMK, TDP, AGP, Samajvadi Party, BSP, Akali Dal, Shiv Sena, etc. in
terms of new forces of power cannot be undermined. These
decies in alliance with national parties and groups have
not only been dominating regional political scene but have
also considerably influenced power politics in New Delhi.
The formation of the United Front, a coalition of thirteen
parties, having dominant constituents such as the Janata
Dal, Samajwadi Party, TDP, DMK, TMC, etc. has led to the
formation of government at the Centre with the help of the
Left parties under the leadership of H.D. Deva Gowda and
I.K. Gujral of the JD in 1996 and 1997, respectively.

The studies of regional elites highlight on the social
background of legislators, district political leaders and
agents of rural vote banks. One of the early studies is by
V.M. Sirsikar of three districts in Maharashtra in which he
finds the control of leadership in the hands of rich peasantry which has traditional social status, wealth and other factors in its favour. The leaders have wealth and land in abundance. Sirsikar finds that the then prevailing situation in Maharashtra, emphasising on rural development, provided an open arena to the economic dominants to transform themselves into power elites. He expresses his serious concern for the democratic setup and socialist goals when the rich assume political leadership for promoting democracy and socialism. The role of the dominant castes in the politics of Maharashtra could be explained during this period in the co-mingling of the economic, political, demo-
ocratic and socialist forces in the same situation. Several other questions apprehending setbacks to democratic and developmental processes have been thrown up in this study by Sirsikar.

Another comparative study of four districts again from Maharashtra in early 1970s was published by Marry C. Carass.19 This study is also based on the demolition of one-party domination thesis. The four districts selected in the study, namely, Pune, Aurangabad, Ratnagiri, and Akola represent geographical, social, and historical distinctions in the state of Maharashtra. Carass posits a determinative relationship between specific factional identity of a group or group member and the corresponding hypothetical policy-orientation regarding something problematical in the political arena. In fact, Carass has analysed the conditions within which factions develop, and the conditions which may determine the particular direction and form of factional alignments. The most important political institutions determining these political conditions are a dominant political organisation and the government of a state, and these two are linked in a relationship of mutual dependence. The emergence of factions is to be seen in the context of these two institutions and the nature of their relationship. Carass concludes by saying that factional behaviour of political actors corresponds with rational economic inter-
est. The politico-economic philosophy of the nation creates mixed opinions, divergent views, and frictional behaviour patterns. Not personal gain but the ideological preferences do play a role in political behaviour and the latter may be linked with considerations of personal interest.

In another study of rural western Maharashtra by Anthony Carter\(^2^0\), it is suggested that the political class is a privileged economic class too. Carter observes that its members own a disproportionate share of the landed wealth of the region and they own a controlling share of most of the region's cooperative societies. As employers members of the political class are able to exert economic control over much of the rest of the population.\(^2^0\) Carter also finds like Carass, the discontinuity in the distribution of political power and the dominance of a small privileged class. There exists vertical and horizontal alliances according to Carter. Patronage by elite leaders to their followers comprises of vertical alliances based on economic relations. The formation of vertical alliances and distribution of patronages are not differentiated by caste or class, and they do not form distinct interest groups. The horizontal alliances are formed within the political class. A leader provides patronage to his followers within his/her political party without representing special interest. The formation of horizontal alliances also depend on the internal caste and kinship structure of the political party. In Carter's
study more important is the use of the term 'political class' implying class approach to the study of political power. However, Carter does not use Marxian class approach in the understanding of vertical and horizontal alliances and political stratification.

c) Leaders and Power Elite

Some of the studies are in fact of leaders rather than that of power elite.\textsuperscript{22} The leadership studies are generally concerned with elected representatives at different levels of political setup. The studies of power elite cover a broader canvas by incorporating leaders of political parties, elected representatives in assemblies and parliament, and those who influence political decision-making and the agents of vote banks. Shashi Sekhar Jha's study of political elite in Bihar,\textsuperscript{23} S.S. Sharma's study of power elite in Uttar Pradesh,\textsuperscript{24} S.V. Narayana's study of district politics in Andhra Pradesh,\textsuperscript{25} and two studies of legislative elite in Rajasthan by Shashi Lata Puri\textsuperscript{26} and R.C. Swarnkar\textsuperscript{27} may be termed as studies of power elite from a limited perspective. In particular it may be mentioned that studies of factions\textsuperscript{28} at different levels of Indian polity have also thrown up light on the nature and dynamics of political leadership. Studies by Paul R. Brass,\textsuperscript{29} Myron Weiner,\textsuperscript{30} Kochanek,\textsuperscript{31} Rudolphs,\textsuperscript{32} Richard Sisson,\textsuperscript{33} and Frankel and Rao\textsuperscript{34} have not only highlighted coalitions, factionalism, conflicts, and
role of religion, caste and language in politics, they have also analysed emergence of peasantry, urban poor, minorities and the rural weaker sections as new vote banks and agents of politicization in the eighties and the nineties.

A couple of studies examine village political leadership vis-a-vis their socio-economic background, keeping in view the institutional changes within the village community and the impact of macro-structural changes on the village polity. Most of these studies focus on the Panchayati Raj institutions and the Cooperative Societies as the two major institutions of power.

The concept of dominant caste as put forward by M.N. Srinivas in particular has attracted several students of rural power structure. However, number of studies have come out with empirical evidence that group dominance is limited to some aspects of social and cultural life. Dominance in economic and political domain is rooted in the family and the individual. Levels of dominance and mobility are to be seen in group, family, and individual levels as distinct entities as well as interconnected domains. However, the studies of village leadership, namely, by Gurumurthy, Orenstein, Bhatnagar, Ramashray Roy, V.B. Singh and many others have highlighted the shifts in the institutional basis of village polity particularly in the context of macro-structural changes and the consequent micro-structural
consequences.

Dynamics of Power-Politics and Elite-formation in Rajasthan

A particular mention about Rajasthan may be made here regarding dynamics of power-politics and elite-formation since independence. About 56 per cent of its population according to 1931 census comprised of the castes of Jat, Brahamin, Mahajan, Chamar, Bhil, Rajput, Meena, Gujar and Mali in the numerically descending order. The three dwij castes, namely, Brahimin, Rajput and Mahajan comprised 20 per cent of the total population. The Jats were comprising of 9.2 per cent of the total population. Lawrence L. Shrad er observes that the "state wide castes of Rajasthan have provided most of the political leaders in the state since independence". He also mentions that the castes such as Brahimin, Mahajan and Jat have provided the modernist leadership, and the Rajput caste has provided the leadership of the opposition and tradition. However, since 1970 the political situation has changed considerably in Rajasthan. Rajasthan has seen a Muslim, a Kayastha and a Rajput Chief Minister in the 1970s and the 1980's. In fact, Shiv Charan Mathur, a Kayastha, became Chief Minister twice, whereas the present Chief Minister B.S. Shekhawat was in the saddle twice earlier also. Barkatuallah Khan was Chief Minister once. All these leaders cannot be accepted as representatives of the opposition and of tradition.
Another important point made by Shradder is that a high social status, college education and age between 30 and 40 years are the principal prerequisites for political leadership in Rajasthan today.\textsuperscript{48} This amalgam of attributes also seems to have undergone a considerable change in recent years. Shradder is perhaps right that no statewide leadership emerged in Rajasthan after independence as the state was a creation of the merger of different princely states. Several divides such as rural-urban, Jat-Rajput, upper and lower castes were obstacles in having statewide leadership. These divides were reflected in the factionalism that perpetrated in the Congress Party in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Richard Sission's study of the power elite and caste-dominance in Rajasthan's Congress Party highlights at length the pre-independence polity and society in the princely states of Rajputana and the forms of urban protests, peasant movements and political change in the post-independence period.\textsuperscript{49} The emphasis in Sisson's study is on the social composition of the Congress Party in terms of various regions and castes and communities. Congruency and circulation of power elite in the fifties and the sixties were the main features noted by Sisson in different regions of Rajasthan.
Sisson characterizes political change in Rajasthan in terms of the transformation of the rules governing public decision-making, patterns of elite-recruitment and the constitution of the political community in both form and orientation. However, the traditional authority and elite-formation did not disappear quickly from the political scene. The traditional elite also did not make concerted efforts to retain their traditional order. Hence, the change was smooth and peaceful after independence. Dominance of the upper castes in the Congress Party in the fifties and the sixties can be explained in terms of such a process of political change. However, the structure of the Congress Party has changed a lot in the post-Sukhadia period. There were always challenges and counter-challenges in the J.N. Vyas period and during Sukhadia's long regime from 1954 to 1971.

Lastly, there are a couple of studies which follow a non-Marxist (non-class) approach to the study of power elite. Studies of power elite by Iqbal Narain, K.C. Pande, and Mohanlal Sharma, Shashilata Puri and R.C. Swarnkar have added to the existing stock of information on power elite and political leadership in Rajasthan. A detailed discussion on these studies will be presented in the subsequent chapters vis-a-vis the present study.
A broader view of power elite is projected in some recent studies. Power is not treated just for the sake of power, it is seen as a phenomenon rooted into class relations, ethnic identities, caste hierarchy, administrative setup, political parties, rural-urban divide and developmental programmes and patterns of distributive justice. Rudolphs refer to 'demand groups' as the main competitors and actors in the present day politics of India. Paul R. Brass discusses political change, political structure, government and political parties to understand the character of the Indian state, society and economy. He locates political actors, decision-making, control of resources etc. in the interaction between these segments of Indian society and state.

More recently emphasis has been put on the interconnection between caste, class and dominance as a regional phenomenon. The two volumes edited by Francine R. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao bring out a storehouse of information on various states in India keeping in view the conceptual issues in the study of caste, class, ethnicity and dominance. It is evident from the studies incorporated in these volumes that caste, class, and ethnicity pattern dominance and in return dominance influences the structure and change of these three socio-cultural and economic formations of Indian society. Some of these studies particularly one by Iqbal Narain and P.C. Mathur will be taken up subsequently for a
deeper scrutiny.

**Concluding Remarks**

We may conclude that power elites whether in formal positions of power and authority or not are capable of influencing effectively the decision-making, whereas (22) leaders despite being in the offices of power and authority, in effect may not be the sole decision-makers. Such an operational definition helps us in examining the relative strength of the elite approach and the class approach to the study of political power. The present decision-making process indicates that it is tilted in favour of the elite-approach. But the very nature of elite-formation has undergone some significant changes. The breakdown of the dominant party thesis and the modernity-tradition syndrome explains the emergence of the regional power elite from the traditional middle and the lower social strata. Such a process of transformation of political power is witnessed in the present study as well. The discontinuity of power elite in Rajasthan since Independence is quite amazing. We propose to discuss the same in the ensuing chapters.
Notes and References


(2) Ibid.; pp.280-296.


(4) See, for example, Bipan Chandra, 1987, India's Struggle for Independence, New Delhi: Viking; and C.P. Bhambhri, 1988, Politics in India, New Delhi: Vikas.


(9) Bailey, F.G., 1960, op. cit.


(13) Kothari, Rajni, 1970, Politics in India, op. cit.

(14) Weiner, Myron, op. cit., p.146.


(15) Carter, Anthony, 1975, Elite Politics in Rural India, New Delhi: Vikas, p.163; Carass, Mary C., 1972, The Dynamics of Indian Political Factions, London: Cambridge University Press, Chapter 9; and Navlakha, Suren, op. cit.


(18) Carass, Mary C., op. cit.


(20) Ibid.


(22) Jha, S.S., op. cit.


(27) Swarankar, R.S., op. cit.


(29) Brass Paul R., op. cit.


(33) Sisson, Richard, op. cit.


(45) Ibid.


(48) Ibid.

(49) Sisson, Richard, 1972, *op. cit.*., p.311.

(50) Ibid.


(52) Puri, S.L., *op. cit.*

(53) Swarankar, R.C., *op. cit.*


(55) Brass, Paul R., *op. cit.*

(56) Frankel and Rao, *op. cit.*


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