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COALITION POLITICS OR ALTERNATIVE POLITICS

IN INDIA: SOCIAL CATEGORIES, POLITICAL SPACES AND CHANGING NATURE

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Let me begin with four different propositions in this particular article: one proposition is the fact that the 'mantra of coalition politics' can not simply be reduced to "party politics" alone rather it has to be viewed or analyzed from the perspective of social categories. In other words, political coalition of social categories has become the hallmark of India politics. Secondly "coalition politics" can not be identified with the arrival of independence or treated as post-colonial phenomenon alone rather it has to be located in anti-colonial struggle and also in the resistance to hegemonic character of the nationalist movement vis-a-vis different social categories; the third proposition is the fact that Indian politics has given rise to multiple social coalitions which can be construed as "notional" and that these social coalition are translating into larger "coalition politics" and finally Indian politics in general Karnataka in particular is now aiming at forming "coalition politics of new type", particularly making or taking social movements as primary forces or actors. It is in this context our article argues that the "mantra" of coalition politics now aims at providing, and locating political spaces for different social categories. Secondly it also argues that there are no single social coalition at present in India and that they can not make absolute claim over the reigns of politics or the social categories that it represents. More than that it is not static in nature it is changing according to the nature of democratic politics. Finally, the experiment that is underway in karnataka is a phenomenon reflecting antipathy to the existing coalition politics.

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Nationalist Movement and Coalition Politics of Social Categories:

In Indian context most of the scholars tries to understand the coalition politics in terms of party coalition without however

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understanding the fact that it was an “alternative politics too”. Secondly they would not understand the coalition politics in terms of social bases of such coalition politics and thereby failed to understand social categories behind such political coalition.

Interestingly in Indian context the era of coalition politics is either seen or located during 1960s when the communists formed government in Kerala or during the Janata regime of 1970s. It is here one fails to understand the fact that the coalition politics can not simply be treated or reduced to the party politics. It requires to be seen as a phenomenon of social categories too. If this formulation is accepted then one can locate the coalition politics in the anti-colonial struggle itself. Incidentally it all began with the emergence of Indian National Congress. INCs growth was the culmination of different social categories into its fold over many years. Its growth was not a phenomenon of over night. It grew slowly by advocating different things to different people. Uptil the beginning of 1920s especially till the entry of Gandhi- its growth was confined initially to cosmopolitan town, upper/ middle class, and “modernist Indians” who would view in the British rule a “providential gift” or “civilization agenda”. Later on it slowly spread to metropolitan cities, urban centers, middle class and to middle castes. Only after Gandhian period that the Congress spread to nook and corner of India, covering large part of Presidency areas, attracting different social categories such as peasant, women, tribals, etc. It really became mass movement. It is here that one can locate the operation of larger coalition politics operating. This is because of the fact that nationalist would see in this coalition politics a strength to confront the colonialist much more vigorously than without it. It was further thought that this coalition would strengthen the mass movement for a single cause — anti colonial struggle. This is the reason why “colonialism” was seen and treated as primary conflictual categories than internal social categories - in fact the internal contradictions and ambiguities were either over looked or side tracked.

Since the Nationalist Congress was the larger platform within which the coalition politics of different social categories was allowed to operate, it did offer different things to different social categories in its resolutions: it would advocate remission to peasants, rights to tribals, trusteeship to hand mill workers, representation to women, temple entry to Dalits, etc. All this does not mean that the coalition that the Congress created or established remained permanent or intact. Even they were not free from challenges.

In fact, the emergence of Communist Party, Muslim League, Congress Socialist Party , etc during the nationalist period requires to

be seen as a reaction to the coalition politics of social categories that the Congress resorted to. It also demolished the myth that Congress represented all the social categories, including the fact that it would hold back different social categories from challenging its hegemony. It is in this context the collapse first coalition politics under Nationalist Congress can be dated back to the colonial period. This collapse also created spaces for alternative politics too. Nonetheless, coalition politics also has been viewed and analyzed as alternative politics. This is because of the fact that it emerged as counter to the hegemonic character of the dominant parties or the politics. It is here one can locate the attempt to create spaces for different social categories within the larger framework of democratic politics. In other words it was an attempt to rework the democratic politics in favour of different social categories. However, there are reasons why such a coalition collapsed:

Firstly, it was a reaction against the top down domination of Congress vis-a-vis different social categories. In fact different social categories were denied an autonomous space to voice their concern other than the Congress. Congress incidentally took upon itself the task of speaking on behalf of different social categories than other way round. Incidentally, during the nationalist struggle an attempt at "alternative politics" went side by side with countering the hegemonic character of the Congress, despite the fact that the latter was heading the nationalist struggle including attracting different social categories into its fold. Congress had created a grand "social coalition of different categories under its umbrella" without however providing autonomous spaces for them to counter the colonial power. Nonetheless there were reasons why the "a new alternative politics" within the colonial framework emerged which brought in different social categories into its fold. It was a new form of coalition politics too- of social categories.

Second, Congress believed and adopted symbolism -in other words its politics revolved around symbolic representation or taking up the issues symbolically without however taking comprehensive issues of social categories. For example, the way it took up the issues or the cause of Ahmadabad Hand Mill workers struggle, or peasant struggle in Kheda, Bardoli, or the temple entry etc represented such symbolism.

Third, there was selectivity in the approach of Congress - it was both geographical as well as category wise. Congress would not try to reach a particular social category at an all India level rather it would take up the issue of particular social category in a particular region or locality and try to extrapolate the same on other areas. This is where the contradiction become not only apparent but also sharp.

Fourth, it was also due to growth or emergence of different ideological streams both from within and without. From within it emerged as a reaction to its liberal-centrist ideology. At the same time it was an attempt to radicalize the Congress from within. Attempts made by the Congress Socialist Party including leftist like M.N. Roy and others needs to be seen or viewed in this particular context. They believed that Congress was neither sufficiently radicalized nor was sufficiently concerned about subalterns such as poor peasants, tenants, backward castes etc. Rather Congress, they believed was under the influence of big Zamindars, Landlords, Industrialists etc. - it was "silent about the larger agrarian issued afflicting the peasantry". Meanwhile the Communists represented by S.A. Dange, M.N. Roy and other advocated an autonomous space for the industrial working class, outside the Congress. Their main thrust however, later on expanded to include peasantry and agrarian labouring class. In other words, there was an attempt to create a grand alliance of social categories: working class, peasantry, and agrarian labouring class - it is here one can locate both the alternative politics as well as coalition politics of social categories during the nationalist movement - their politics however, distinctively differentiated from the politics of nationalists under Congress-

Nonetheless, the Congress Socialist who later on became or formed socialist party tried to combine Gandhian philosophy with a tinge of Marxism. This can be called "hybridity of ideology" Interestingly they were combining both class as well as caste categories in their analysis and in their every day practices. It is here they attempted to create a new coalition politics of social categories, especially the OBCs, dominant caste or the middle caste. This is done by using the idiom or language of land or agrarian reforms, land to the tiller, etc. Their politics to some extent helped in retrieving social as well as political spaces for the OBCs or the middle castes in the larger democratic politics of India. This is apparent in Bihar, Karnataka etc. Their politics continued upto the end of 1970s - later on the socialist politics either merged with the "dominant party" or fizzled out as a movement.

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Post-Colonialism and Coalition Politics:

Challenge to the coalition politics that the nationalist movement under Congress ushered in during the anti-colonial struggle continued ever after 1947. However, the challenge that the different social categories posed vis-a-vis the Congress in the initial period after the independence was muted- there are reasons for such a trend. One of

the reasons is the fact that Congress, the success to the nationalist movement, once again resorted to the same strategy of appropriating different social categories for its political ends-this time its agenda was to retain the political power rather than challenging it. It is in this particular context Indian political system came to be known as "dominant party system" single party system or "Congress System". This is because Congress continued to hold on to power for many years till regional political parties or new political formations start challenging it. This it could able to engineer through the methods of appropriating different social categories including Muslims within its fold, In fact, it resorted to and adopted different methodologies to appropriate the social categories. One of the methodologies was introducing "land reforms" - even though it did succeed in brining in large number of retrenched social categories, including the fact that this land reforms measure did help in creating social bases for the Congress, however, it could not solve the larger issues afflicting the land altogether. This is because of the fact that Congress while advocating and introducing "radical land reforms" was simultaneously involved in compromising with feudal, non-capitalist categories. This helped in defeating the 'radicalism of land reforms' too - this kind of politics once again helped in the growth of uneven, lopsided development of India. Second important measure or the methodology was to introduce populist measures such as green revolution, bank nationalization, co-operative movement etc. All these measures nonetheless helped in the linking of local market with the larger market including the fact that it helped in the growth of new social categories such as rich peasantry. Incidentally this category however came from dominant caste from different parts of India. At the same time Congress failed to address the core issues of other social categories, even though it gave the minorities a sense of 'security' but it did not solve their socio-economic issues. Minorities were appropriated for its political ends - they were not given the autonomous space that they once occupied during the nationalist movement. The "loss f space" was indeed benefited the Congress.

It is in this midst that the Congress failed to address the larger issues of other categories such as middle class, merchant class, working class including upper caste etc. At the same time Congress failed to over come the large number of contradictions both from within and without, even though it could able to create a new social coalition in recent years-KHAM-Kshatriyas, Harijans, Ahirs. and Muslims in different parts of India. Nonetheless, this new social coalition never became a permanent feature nor such a coalition homogenized the social categories. No sooner the contradictions within the Congress became

sharp, the social coalition collapsed and helped in placing new political parties in the political scape of India. This phenomenon one can locate during the decade of 1960s and 1970s.

In fact, during this decade the dominant or hegemonic character of the Congress came under sever contestation from within and without, especially from those who were dissatisfied with its politics or were looking from creating 'autonomous spaces by forming alternative politics. Emergence of Lok Dal, Kranti Dal, Congress for Democracy etc were the offshoots of such contradiction as well as the dissatisfaction. Even the growth of Jana Sangha or the BJP in recent years needs to be seen in this particular politics of dissatisfaction of social categories-particularly urban middle class, merchant class, etc.

All these do not mean that the political coalition of social categories represented by or in different political parties perpetually remained intact or strong. In fact there was an attempt during 1970s to create a broader political coalition, which is often called as the first attempt at "coalition politics". Incidentally the antagonistic, or conflictual interests within these political coalition could not able to sustain the "experiment" for long time. One such classic case is the way Janata "experiment" collapsed- the latter was an attempt of different political parties whose social bases were different and were mutually antagonistic to each other - Lok Dal was largely a party of dominant caste as well as rich peasantry of north India, Jana Sangha was a party of urban merchant class, Congress for Democracy was not only representing Dalits but also Old Congress ideology.

Such oscillation of political coalition of social categories has become the hallmark of India politics. No party now can claim an absolute hold over different social categories. Secondly given the multiplicity of social categories entering into the political domains the politics now has become a center of contestation between social categories. At present newly entrenched categories are trying to appropriate the political space for themselves vis-a-vis the other social categories. Incidentally Old social coalition has given rise to new social coalition with OBCs, Middle caste taking the center stage. This can be seen in the way RJD in Bihar continued to hold on to power. In Karnataka it has given rise to "MOVD" - Muslims, Other Backward Class/Castes, Vokkaligas, and Dalits Incidentally the political coalitions of social categories such as "KHAM" and "MOVD" oscillate between one centrist politics to another - this is where they try to create spaces for themselves within the larger democratic politics. In fact, when this social coalition oscillate or split between two or three centrist politics, its consequences are much more: it ends up either in the political instability with no centrist

politics, able to form a government of its own or it might benefit the "Hindutva" to gain upper hand in the democratic politics.

However what changed the Indian politics in recent years is the growth of Hindutva politics. Hindutva which once stood for the interest of upper caste, urban middle class now seriously trying to destroy or divide the political coalition that sustained the centrist politics in India. There are two reasons behind such a move: one, to create strong bases among different social categories who are historically outside the "Hindutva politics" and two, to realize its larger agenda of forming "Hindutva state". It is doing through its political manifestation - principally the BJP. Towards enlarging its social bases and thereby creating new political coalition of social categories - such as backward castes, Tribals, Dalits, Dominant caste etc it is resorting to multiple methods : appropriating the symbols of syncretism, reinterpreting the history, creating "other" from within the society, using the cultural symbols, celebrative politics, establishing different civil society groups, etc. This has partly helped in constructing new social coalition and, at the same time it has helped in destroying the historical social coalition that sustained the centrist politics - one such example is the destruction or division of KHAM. At the same time it could able to create multiple social coalitions at the political level. For example in Karnataka it has created two kinds of notional social coalitions: one, 3 Bs -Bunts, Baniyas (merchant class) and Backward Class - this is apparent in the coastal belt and two, LIBRA - Lingayats and Brahmins (upper caste). In fact in certain pockets of India it could able to appropriate die tribals to its fold (for example Gujarat). It is here it is trying to reach out different social categories through multiple methods. In other words, it is quite possible that in India multiple "political coalition of social categories "or social coalition of different categories is a possibility at any point of time - in both the cases the coalition ultimately aims at retrieving political spaces for different social categories and secondly, it also aims at appropriating social categories for the larger political agendas/ends.

Nonetheless, in recent years the coalition politics has taken one more shift. Although social categories constitute the core to the politics in India, however, new social actors are now entering in- to the domain of politics to form what is called alternative politics". These social actors are no other than the civil society groups, particularly the various social movements are now attempting at forming "grand coalition of social movement "to occupy the political space". In fact, such attempts by the social movements is not a new one - it can be located when Narayana Swamy Naidu of Tamiliga Vyavasaigal Sangam contested the election thinking the peasant movement would triumph in the

electoral politics during the late 1970s, but in vain. Sharada Joshi enacted this particular politics in Maharashtra during 1980s. In Karnataka too such an attempt was made by the KRRS during 1980s, under different banner such as Voters' Forum. Even individuals did try, who represented the interests of social movements. Classic example is the attempt made by late Shivaram Karnat, Janapada Awardee in Ankola taluk in Uttar Kannada during 1980s. All these attempts either failed mainly because of the fact that they could not able to take along with them different social categories so as to form a "grand social coalition" which would translate into political coalition of social categories.

Nonetheless a serious attempt is now underway both at the Karnataka level as well as the all India level to bring in different social movements for the purpose of occupying political spaces- this obviously means that they are left out or out of the political space, particularly the space of political power. At the all India level National Alliance of People's Movement has experimented symbolically by bringing different social movements such as environment, workers union, fishermen's union or movement, tribals movement etc.

In Karnataka there are attempt to envelop social movements particularly Dalit and Farmer's movement to form a grand "coalition of social movements" to occupy and also to retrieve the political spaces for respective social categories of social movements - such as Dalits and Farmers. This is also an attempt to create new type of coalition politics, Which is also called "alternative politics"- here the disenchantment with the centrist politics is very much apparent. However what is coming in the way of forming the grand coalition is the following facts: that both have different social bases of each of the social movements in the final analysis are placed opposite or antagonistic to each other, that both are internally divided and that, both have seen "multiple splits" over the years which has weakened the movements considerably; that no two social movements can claim complete hold over the categories which they are representing (peasant movement can not for example claim that it represents the entire peasant of Karnataka, same is the case with the Dalit Movement). More than that this attempt is silent about other social categories such as : Minorities, Women,. Interestingly it is also using the language of castes too: its coalition is not only meant for social movements but also aims at appropriating OBCs, backward Castes and Dalits. This is where new coalition politics will come into conflict with the centrist politics- as both have common social bases or the social categories as bases. This has two consequences: one, it will strengthen the democratic

politics by providing the spaces for different social categories who are either disenchanted or dissatisfied with the centrist politics two, equally dangerous is the fact this would ultimately helps in Hindutva gain upper hand over other ideological streams in India. At present Hindutva might have been politically defeated - but not culturally - Political defeat does not mean an end of an ideology. It is using the cultural means to expand its politics. It is in this two scenario that one has to locate the possibilities of coalition politics or alternative politics of the social categories or the social movements moving in India in years to come.

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