

The political importance of regional parties



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The number of national political parties recognized by the Election Commission of India is just six as it stands now: Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Bahujan Samaj Party, Aam Aadmi Party and National People's Party. And the number of state parties recognized is 57. Apart from these, the number of parties registered with the ECI, yet unrecognized, is 2,597. While Europe boasts around 150 regional parties, India abounds in countless parties.

Oldest regional party

It is the DMK floated in 1949, which is the oldest regional political party in India. C.N. Annadurai, the founder of the party, decided to plunge into electoral politics only after getting his party volunteers' consent through a referendum. It is a classic example of intra-party

democracy. Following the majority decision made by the volunteers, the DMK contested the Assembly elections in 1957 and won 15 constituencies, springing a surprise on the then Congress Chief Minister K. Kamaraj. Consequently, in the 1962 Assembly elections, Kamaraj strove hard to get the DMK defeated in those 15 constituencies, all the more intensely to defeat the DMK leader Annadurai. The Congress fielded Natesa Mudaliar, a transport company proprietor, against Anna in Kanchipuram. The voters in the constituency were given Rs. five each by the Congress and thus it was this national party which pioneered the cash-for-vote syndrome. The party also made the voters swear on the portrait of Lord Venkatachalapathy that they would vote for the Congress only. Anna, who lost the election then, remarked humorously, “It was not Natesa Mudaliar, who defeated me. It was rather Lord Venkatachalapathy, who descended from Tirupathi hills and worked against me defeating me.”

Despite Anna’s electoral defeat, his party improved on its previous election tally and won 50 constituencies in 1962, getting for the first time the status of an opposition party. Nedunchezhiyan became the opposition leader and M. Karunanidhi the deputy opposition leader in the Assembly. After five years, that is, in 1967 the DMK leapfrogged from the status of opposition party to that of the ruling party. Tamil Nadu has since been ruled by either of the two Dravidian majors.

In other states

In most states in the country, it is only the regional parties that call the shots. For instance, in Andhra and Tamil Nadu, the regional parties are in power as well as in the opposition. In several states, dissident Congress leaders have floated their own parties. Examples are the Biju Janata Dal, Trinamool Congress, Y.S.R.Congress, Nationalist Congress Party and whatnots! Mamta Banerjee had quit the Congress, floated the Trinamool Congress and captured power in West Bengal. The Congress and Communist parties, which had once ruled the state, over time lost influence. The BJP is now the major opposition party, posing a challenge to the TMC in the state.

In Odisha, it is the Biju Janata Dal, which has been in power for the past 25 years. Naveen Patnaik, party leader, has consecutively been the Chief Minister of the state.

Once upon a time, it was the Congress which held Uttar Pradesh under its thumb. But with the advent and ascent of regional parties, it was pushed down to the third or fourth slot in political equations. Now the BJP is in power and the Samajwadi Party the opposition party in Uttar Pradesh.

National alliances

The INDIA front cobbled together by the opposition parties consists mainly of the regional parties. The national party Congress has had to tie up with the regional parties in Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh because of the compulsions and demands of electoral politics. In Bihar, the Rashtriya Janata Dal has allied with the Congress for the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

Like the Congress, the BJP, which is in power at the Centre and in several states, is also facing the necessity of allying with regional parties. It has held alliance talks with regional parties including the Biju Janata Dal. Now reports say that the talks have not borne fruits. Yet the BJP has struck an alliance with the Telugu Desam in Andhra and the PMK in Tamil Nadu.

Compulsion of time

As far as the Congress is concerned, back in the 1960s it was the single monolithic party across the country. The Delhi high command of the party used to not allow its Chief Ministers to rule the states on their own. The power of making governance-related decisions in the Congress ruling states was vested with the Delhi-based high command of the national party. This approach, which was its advantage once, deteriorated over the years to be its major weakness.

Back in Tamil Nadu, the Congress used to launch no large-scale election campaigns in the 1960s. The Congress candidates would meet the village munsiff or the village head and the religious heads as well, soliciting support in the elections. This was the Congress electoral practice. Anna changed this election strategy and sent his volunteers and candidates directly to the doorstep of the voters, soliciting votes. This was the crux of the DMK election strategy that paid rich dividends to the party, also owing to the paradigm shift caused in the people's thinking.

But the Congress considered it unnecessary for the party functionaries to understand the dynamics of intra-party democracy. It was content with just walking the talk.

When Congress leader Devaraj Urs was the Chief Minister of Karnataka, it was Morarji Desai, who was the Prime Minister. When Desai was on a visit to Bengaluru, Urs, as the CM, did not go all the way to welcome the PM and instead, sent his Chief Secretary to do the job. The episode drove home how Urs was loyal to his party leader and former PM Indira Gandhi. However, Desai did not take it seriously. Ironically, it was, though, the same Urs, who had fallen out with Indira and floated his own party. Similarly, the national party BJP is criticised for discriminating against the opposition-ruling states. It must understand that what happened to the Congress over the year might happen to it also.

The reason the people accept the regional parties of states is that the parties' functioning and ideologies are inclined towards the growth of the states concerned. Such a state-oriented thinking is absent in the national parties, thereby distancing them from the people. Currently the two major state parties in India are the DMK and AIADMK – both boasting crores of members. It is a compulsion of the present time that the national parties cannot dispense with regional parties.

It is the state parties which play a vital role in safeguarding the rights of the states and fighting unnecessary interference from the union

government. In this respect, the importance of the regional parties will keep increasing. That is what all stakeholders must understand.

Translated by V. Mariappan.