

POLITICAL PARTIES : A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: In every modern polity, and in every polity which aspires for modernity, political parties are indispensable link between the society and the government just as social identities influence the organizational forms of political life, so do political organizations shape the forms of social identifications. The pattern of party system, however varies from state to state, as it is largely shaped by the socio economic milieu of a particular society. The nature of cleavages or contradictions in a given society and the general level of its economic development largely influence the type of party system that will prevail in the society. In this paper, we have tried to provide a general theoretical framework of political party and party system, their origin, development and relevance in a democratic set-up.

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The Phenomenon of political parties is a relatively recent development on the stage of world political history. It is only in the wake of the technological innovations ushered in by the Industrial revolution that vast societal changes had taken place in the short space of a little over two centuries with momentous consequences for political power and political organization. Startling breakthroughs in the mode of production and the resultant phenomenal changes in social relations and in the levels of cultural attainment have brought about a new type of political community into existence. Consequently as ever larger sections of the population have become involved in the production process and the social interaction related thereto, they have become increasingly aware of the stake they have demanded a larger say in socio – economic affairs than they ever did before. Greater political awareness and participation are, the but logical corollaries to the major developments that have taken place in socio – economic spheres.

Rise of Political Parties

The rise of Industrial capitalism which marks the advent of rising bourgeoisie and consequently the demise of old feudal order heralded the advent of the modern political parties. It was the rising bourgeoisie that posed the principle challenge to the existing order, in order to reduce control over their trade, the latter were forced either to surrender power to the former or to share it with them, and thus the scope of political activity was considerably widened. It was among the bourgeoisie that modern political parties made their appearance. Increasing industrialization and urbanization produced on the one hand the large laboring classes, and on the other led to a further diversification within the ranks of the bourgeoisie and to the rise of the middle – classes. These new classes had to be accommodated in the decision – making processes of the political economy. As new industrial commercial, technical, service and labor interests emerged on the political scene, new groups and parties arose to articulate their demands and champion their causes. And the more complex society became, the greater was the need felt for organizing these groups on a systematic basis. Further while political activity became more wide spread and better organized, it led to the gradual extension of the franchise, with it politics became more participative, ever been before. Parties competed with one another in championing the claims of diverse segment of the electorate and on gaining the maximum number of sympathizer and supporters to push through their programme various ‘mixes’ of parties professing democratic socialism or social – economic democracy arose among the petty bourgeoisie and the middle

classes with the declared objective of combining democratic freedom with social justice irrespective of their societies like India, where the process of class formation has not been completed and is much more complicated due to over bearing legacy of the colonial period and the forces of neo-colonial world forces, the capitalist character of the these societies is getting more and more ostensible.¹ As George Novack observed the alienation of democracy from capitalism in the political consciousness of colonial people is demonstrated in the paradoxical fact that now a day almost all the capitalistic nature of their economy and goal, paste the honorific label of socialism upon their professed democracy. This was true of the guided democracy of Indonesia's late President Sukarno, the popular democracy of Naseer and not the least the Crises torn government of the bourgeoisie Congress party of India which deceptively proclaims itself to be as much socialist as democratic.²

Further following Duverger, we can distinguish between those parties which rose from within the ruling elites and those which rose from outside the ruling elite³ La Palombara and Weiner observe that latter type of parties are more recent phenomena, they are invariably associated with an expanded suffrage strongly articulated ideologies, and in most of the developing societies nationalistic and anti – colonial movements, and finally involve same challenge to the ruling group.

As modern societies became more atomized and more pluralist, and as older value-system, loyalty patterns and social structure crumbled, new forces, ideologies and forms of organization emerged to take their place. Prominent among these new forces, ideologies and organizational forms were those represented by the political parties which competed fiercely for men's loyalties, while promising to usher in a new order in place of the old order or as in the case of the bourgeoisie conservative parties – to give the old order a new lease of life. These parties had to reckon with the fact that while the forces of modernity resolved many of the traditional forms of cleavage in society, they also brought in their wake new forms of cleavages that required new methods of reconciliation and managements. They had to face up to these manifold challenges in order to gain as wide a following as they possibly could through a sufficiently representative cross-section of the national community. In fine, the aggregation of interests must go hand in

hand with their articulation. Parties that have failed to widen ‘themselves’ have ended as sectional or regional parties with a restricted support base.

Such parties cannot by themselves aspire to capture state power and must rely on some form of coalition with another party or parties.

A survey of the modern International political scene will reveal that political parties have come to stay. Though political thinkers at the caliber of Rousseau expressed grave reservations about the usefulness of political parties, no modern state whatever the political system under which it operates has functioned without them. Whether one considers a single party system such as has existed under communism or fascism or one of the more recent brands of Third – World nationalism : or a dominant one party system such as is illustrated by the Indian party-system dominated by the ruling congress party : or a bi-party system as that is obtaining in U.K. or the U.S., or yet a multi-party system such as prevails in some of the West European Countries, one is confronted with the fact that political power requires to be legitimized through the consent and judgment of the people on a semblance of it and this role is sought to be played by political parties, whether in competition with one another or in concert with one another or to the exclusion of the other. Party less democracy’ expressed on the grassroots showing of power by people on the basis of consensus and in the spirit of co-operation, may be a laudable good to strive for and in India, some of the noblest spirits like Gandhi⁴ has advocated such a political system. But the immediate feasibility of such a system is not quite evident and political parties seem for the present to be the most convenient vehicles of mobilization of popular support in a vast and highly differentiated society.

Political Parties – Meaning:

Various scholars have attempted a definition of the political party bringing out several distinctive features of its nature and functions. A discussion of all of them is trivial here, so we wish to define the term in following terms. “A pol. party is an identifiable group of members of a national society⁵who organize themselves on a stable bases with the purpose of acquiring, retaining and exercising power within that society in order to secure what they perceive to be the

goals of that society and who endeavor to mobilize to that end the support of as large a section of that same society as possible”

The definition just given is specific enough to apply to the political party alone as distinguishable from every other form of group or organization within society. It is at the same time broad enough in its scope to fit any type of political party. The definition holds good, moreover, whatever the nature of the politics or party system under considerations, as it includes functions that every political party necessarily must perform

In the light of the above definition of the political party, it is possible to discuss its principal functions in a society. However, before turning to party's function, it is necessary to consider certain basic functions that society as a whole must perform. The political party, if it aims at the exercise of power over whole of society, needs to keep its own functions in harmony with the functions of society as a whole. Even if it is a minority party it cannot afford to function in so narrow and sectarian a manner as to jeopardize the interest of society as a whole.

Every society must perform the vital-task of ‘pattern – maintenance’⁶ in as much as it is concerned with maintaining the pattern of society as a whole, while giving value to each of its components. Political parties cannot afford to work cross-purpose with the social function of pattern-maintenance. It is a dynamic concept, and admits of changes – even revolutionary changes, however even a revolutionary society needs to maintain the fabric of its existence and thus must perform this function.

The second task is that of goal attainment.⁷ In every society there are needs to be fulfilled and problems to be solved. No political party worked explicitly to downplay any of the basic goals of societies, although they may differ in their emphasis.

The last one is of environmental adjustment.⁸ While each national society is a vital social system by itself, it constitutes part of a world-wide system with which it inter-acts. So there is always a process of mutual give and take they perform by their articulation of foreign-policy, which they seek to relate to domestic policy.

By the foregoing discussion it is now clear that any political party is faced with the task of mobilizing society or at least some sections of it for the above discussed functions. For this it has to make itself conversant with the needs of various sections of the people and identify itself as much as may be with their aspirations. This task may be called 'interest articulation'.

It is evident however, that while articulating the interests of one section of society, a political party may offend the interests of another. It has therefore to dovetail the interests in so far as these are compatible of various sections of society. This means that it has to aggregate or to relate organically cross-sectional interests by shifting the essential from the peripheral and the universal from the particular. Further it must be ordered according to priority so that wider societal interests are not subordinated to narrow sectional ones. This function is called "interest aggregating".

While articulating and aggregating interests, the political party cannot afford to be merely passive in accepting demands of various sections of society, it has to have a perspective of its own, so that it may give an orientation to those demands, it must make initiative in molding political opinions and attitudes in the direction, it considers desirable. Socialization to politics or political socialization is that important function whereby a political party educates society politically by inculcating in it norms and values that will enable it to strive for the optional pattern of power – relationships or relations.

While considering the functions of political parties it must be born in mind that they are the product of various socio-economic forces operating in a society, nourished by a particular class, so its ideology, way of functioning, attitudes, organization are influenced by the class to whom it represents – and the class's position in social relation of production, and further the socio-economic and political milieu in which they operate.

Classification of Political Parties :

Political party-types have been distinguished on the basis of a variety of criteria. Some have classified parties into interest based and ideology based.⁹ It is open to debate whether such a classification does justice to real nature of political parties. On the basis of empirical experience,

we can safely maintain that interest and ideology cannot be divorced from each other though in certain instances, emphasis could be laid on one over the other.

Another classification is made on the basis of their membership,¹⁰ is a particular party mass-based or cadre-based? it is the former, if membership is open to any and every individual with a commitment to the ideology, it is the latter if the party restricts its membership to a few carefully selected persons. The communist parties are examples of cadre based while Indian National Congress – a mass based. A further basis is their style of operating, which can be patent or latent. If it is ‘patent’ the decision-making process in the party will take the form of an open forum, if it is latent the decision-making process within the party will tend to be restricted to elite groups.¹¹ Further we could consider the territorial and functional structuring of political parties as another criterion for classifying them, under this classification; parties could be viewed as unitary or federal. Another basis is the scope of party activities thus there are parties of limited and unlimited scope. But that is not a significant categorization as the so called ‘unlimited scope’ parties do leave many areas of life outside the scope of their activities, while on the other hand the ‘limited scope’ parties make inroads into many significant areas of private life.

In fact there is no such thing as a pure party-type or party-model. Parties are usually amalgams of several trends so much so that they cannot be neatly pigeon-holed according to our academic predilections. The Indian national congress is a typical case of a political party that displays an amalgam of diverse party traits. While holding to a certain ideology, the party is based on identifiable interests, while being federal in form it has a unitary power structure, while being patent in style it has its latent operational process as well. Thus we should beware of facile generalization of the basis of party stereo-types.

Determinants : Party and party system :

The party system is at best a by-product of the social system. The nature of the cleavages or contradictions in a given society and the general level of its economic development largely influence the type of party system that will prevail in that society. Social differentiation in terms of class is the reflection of the pattern of relationship based on control over the economic resources of a society, this control has spin-off benefits on other ‘non-economic’ field well.

Thus other factors being equal the economic factor is most crucial determinant of the power-pattern in society. One can thus take class as to be the single most crucial valuable in social-composition. Contradiction or cleavages in terms of the non-class contradictions are accentuated and where class contradictions are not so acute, the other non-class contradictions remain in equilibrium. Further as a society moves further along with road from traditionalism` to modernity, economic factors in social organization became more manifest and take increasingly over other non-economic factors, e.g. language, caste etc. Although it should be not construed to mean that non-economic factors are insignificant, but what we mean to say that they tend to be increasingly subordinated to economic considerations.

While social composition in terms of economically determined class as also of other non-class variables is important in explaining the nature of the party system in a given society, the general level of its economic development is equally important in co-explaining it.

Whether a society has a greater degree of homogeneity or of heterogeneity is of great importance for the party system as it evolves in that society. Like-wise whether that society is economically more developed or relatively under-developed has consequence for the party system. The degree of homogeneity/heterogeneity related to the degree of development/under development will give rise to varying party-systems and party configurations. It would be convenient to consider the type of party-system that would most likely arise in each of the following situations. ¹⁴ First, a relatively homogeneous society with a low general level of economic development. Second a relatively homogenous society with a higher general level heterogeneity and with a low general level of economic development. In this category we may put the case of India, and finally, a society with a greater degree of heterogeneity but with a higher general level of economic development.

Since the discussion of all possible types of societies and their party-system is not desired, so a very brief discussion is being undertaken.

First in a homogeneous-under developed society social cleavages would be less pronounced, social homogeneity would probably be reflected in political homogeneity, the degree of under

function. Thus a single –party system, strongly ideological with well trained cadres and its organizational structure would be centralized. As political pluralism has its roots in social pluralism, such a party would seek to curb the latter to the maximum extent possible. And since the politically most significant variable in determining social pluralism is class, the party would attempt either class abolition as a communist or radical

Socialist party would do, or class-reductionism in the form of a corporate state as a fascist party would do.

Turning over attention to a society that is relatively homogenous-developed here the pattern maintenance would be to the fore. Societal problems would be articulated in pragmatic rather than in ideological terms and the political approach would be instrumental and experimental. Such a society would support a pluralist party system of the liberal sort. Ideology would not be entirely absent but would take a variety of flexible formulations.

Since the party system could allow a fair measure of political pluralism, parties would not be averse to the policy of class collaboration in society.

In a heterogeneous-developed society, much the same party system as characterized a homogenous developed society, would prevail. In this society class – contradictions are not so acute, so non-economic contradictions are de-emphasized and maintained in some sort of equilibrium. Such a society would support a pluralist party system of the liberal variety.

Finally, in a heterogeneous under developed society (in this category we may put the case of India), both pattern maintenance and goal attainment clamor for attention, the former because of the existing social contradictions and the latter because of the low level of economic development, which could aggravate the exiting contradictions, especially the class contradictions while pattern maintenance would call for pluralism in the political sphere in response to pluralism in the social sphere, the urgency of goal attainment would call for a single party system that would gear society to the task of rapid economic development.

The progress that has been made in the study of political parties and party system has been attained despite continued inability to resolve a number of key conceptual problems. Most prominent among these are- how to define a party, how to classify parties ,and party system, how to conceptualizes the environment or context, and impact of a party and the interaction between it and environment. The surprising development in this regard is that, despite all these difficulties, researchers are engaged in making an empirical study of party politics with the aim of refining the discipline.

References:

1. See 'Nature of Indian State' and 'The Contemporary State' in Teaching Politics, Vol. XIII, Department of Political Science, Delhi University, Delhi, articles contributed respectively by S. Kaushik and M. Mohanty.
2. George Novack quoted in A. R. Desai ' State and Society in India'. p.79 (Popular, Bombay – 1975)
3. See M.Duverger Political Parties, their organization and activity in modern state, (London, Meethun 1964) he called them as interior and exterior party. The first emerge in response to democratization and the Second to realize some revolutionary objectives, or safeguards some interest. He further finds three line of distinction between them. 1. While former develop from 'in' to 'out' the latter show reverse tendency. Secondly, exterior parties are more coherent than interior and finally, For interior wining of seats in legislature is supreme purpose for exterior it is only one of the elements in the general activity that they use to realize their political ends.
4. Mahatma Gandhi was in favor of the dissolution of the Congress as a party after Independences and its conversion into an organization devoted exclusively to constructive work and social-service.
5. The pol. party is a group of 'members of a national society' as there is no such thing as a international pol. party. The communist International did support on its early years, to be a world-wide party of communists whose allegiance to the international Proletariat as drawn by bourgeoisie an impaerialist regimes. But in course of time the Cominternit self had to be disbanded and International Communist movement which once had Moscow as its sole seat of authority had to come to terms with a nationalist pluralism with in the coummunist world itself Given the fact that the nation state as at present constituted is the basic organizational unit of the

world community it stands to reason that political parties will have to function with in their respective national communities primarily in terms of national problems and priorities and only derivatively in terms of foreign policy.

6. See Gabriel Almond ‘Comparative politics – A developmental approach’ (Little Brown Co. Inc., Boston, Massachusetts, U. S. 1966) pp – 73-127.

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 .Neuman Distinguishes between parties of expediency interests and those of an all inclusive ‘faith-movement’ in ‘Towards a comparative study of pol. Parties’ in his (edited.) “Modern Political Parties: Approaches to Comparative Politics” (Chicago, University of Chicago Press,1956).

10 .M. Durerger, op.cit. he also distinguishes between direct and indirect parties, depending on whether members are enrolled in the body of the party itself or in some other body like a trade union affiliated to the party.p-35

11. See Duverger’s treatment at the inner-circle, p-155 and Michel’s Iron law of Oligarchy. p.p. 400-401

12 .Needless to say, homogeneity/heterogeneity as also development/under-development are relative terms that admits of degree and therefore level to a myriad possible of permutations and combinations. But what is attempted here is a very board categorization of ‘typical’ situations in which objective variables are likely to support one particular party system over another.