

The future of politics and the politics of the future

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POLITICS in India was once the most open of systems. Between electoral politics and civil society experiments, India was justly celebrated as a democracy. Today, that world of the party and the electoral process reflects a closure of ideas. Initially though, political pandits misled us by contending that our youth was consumerist and apolitical. The decline of the political was once a major issue, but today it is the party system that needs a hearing aid as it lacks responsiveness to the politics played outside it. This emerging politics needs a political obstetrics to deliver the new fully.

The appearance of the new is almost tacit, even stillborn. The new lurks in the corner waiting for the old to play itself out. But one thing is clear: the litany of the decline of the political is no longer true. Politics need not always express itself as ideology, plan, and governance. It seeks new metaphors, new scripts, new utopias and heroes. Politics in India is now about waiting for the new, at a moment when old formulas and politicians are reluctant to abandon the stage. It is just that India has changed but our politicians are virtually the same. The irony is that our politicians do not recognize what is happening.

When the new is not yet born and the old holds on stubbornly, an incarnation of the old pretending to be new takes centre stage. This politics of the interim masquerading as the new is noisy, hysterical, a pseudo-prophetic mix of categories, a cafeteria of desires, a costume ball of hope. One sees it woven around Rahul, Nitish and Modi. They are tossed up like three trial balloons, three thought experiments the nation could vote on. It is a tentative circus of styles, options, and alternatives.

First, Narendra Modi rewrites the Hindutva past as the new *bandh-gala* technocrat, the *swadeshi pracharak* who thinks global. His style is most accommodating to corporate dons, his words are minted anew, and he speaks with all the enthusiasm of a convert. Then there is Nitish Kumar playing out the last wisps of a JP dream, talking of inclusivity, of a politics of coalition where one carries the other groups along. Finally, there is Rahul – thoughtful, invertebrate in ideas, seeking a distance from a stereotypically corrupt Congress. All three are old arguments in new bottles, seeking brand value where there is none. The hysteria over the three shows not an intensity of the political but its decline. They are potted ideas in potted costumes sold by statesmen of the mediocre.

To understand the emerging politics of today, one needs to go beyond parties, trade unions or elections. One has to examine the categories of

thinking, which in turn have created an alternative politics of desire. Fundamentally, one begins with the body and its relation to the body politic. The body and the fate of the body become the subject of state formation. The plan as a disciplinary formation for the management of the body was consolidated through two historic events – the Bengal famine and the Partition. Both were gigantic acts of genocide. The Bengal famine was planned and systematic. The British let a local population die so that the Japanese would not access food. It was an act of starvation by design which eliminated close to three million people. The Partition eventually displaced 23 million people and cost 1.6 million lives. Planning virtually arose as a way of domesticating these momentous displacements. In fact, one quickly recognizes that the history of the body is an intrinsic part of the history of the state.

Planning created the socialist body, with ideas of deferred gratification. The socialist body was a bounded body which read consumption as a right to a ration card. The socialist body was a bourgeois bureaucratic *babu* body in a public sector garb.

Liberalization devastated the socialist body politic, disconnecting the body from the formal body politic. The body exploded into a variety of dialects. One can list the commoditized body of transplants, the rented body for surrogate babies, the tortured body, the consumer body, the sexually liberated body, the raped body, the informal body, the secret body of incest, the displaced body, the abandoned body of the streets, the dispensable body, the terrorized body, the body of the survivor. This explosion of bodies created new fears, anxieties, desires, needs which the socialist body could neither domesticate nor dream of. To the socialist body, which saw control as a set of licenses, the consumer body was literally licentious. The politics of desire, of instant gratification emphasized consumption as a key aspect of citizenship. Consumption was seen as depoliticizing, but consumption which emphasized quality, immediacy, delivery and service, made the younger generation question a passive theory of citizenship, where the body waited patiently or occasionally burst into protest.

The consumer as client or stakeholder bought both an impatience and a new set of expectations to citizenship. He wanted the public and private space of the body to be protected. The intimate body could not be intruded on and the public body deserved its spaces of performativity. The consumer was more knowledgeable than the citizen who awoke once in five years. A consumer thought on his feet and transferred to citizenship his wider impatience about delivery. Corruption was an insult to consumption. Its ritual of delay was exasperating. It is not surprising that rape and corruption have become the first two sites of protest for this new generation.

In addition, time becomes fundamental to citizenship and identity. Speed signifies a way of defining access, mobility, success and even a way of problem solving. Delay became a threat to consumption and the entitlements of citizenship.

Third, the politics of desire moved between the imagination and the imaginary. The imagination dealt with the possible, the feasible. It was a ritual of extrapolation. For instance, if one thought of the nation, one thought of the categories of state, territory, boundary, security, sovereignty. One did not dream beyond the facticity of the nation state. The imaginary dealt with the dream, the could be, the what if, the future as unthought of. The imaginary thought of the feasibility of the unfeasible. Given these imaginaries, which globalization encouraged, the current rituals of politics seemed dull and constraining. The nation was dreaming of a politics beyond the current regimes of politics. We have to add to this reworking of categories a set of cultural and social contexts.

Think of this. Demographically, India is new. The division is not between India and Bharat but generational. Over 70% of our population is under 25. It has no memories of nationalism, socialism or the Emergency. This new India belongs to the towns. It is upwardly mobile. It is aspirational. It realizes one can secede from the old India in many ways. It has domesticated the information revolution, not through UID or a reorganization of land records but through the mobile phone. The mobile phone was a better answer to socialism and bureaucracy than any ideology. Illiterates could use it by reconverting numbers to a local morse. Blank calls could be reworked as messages.

The mobile phone was an electronic cosmos. One created the social through it. The socialist state promising phone lines looked silly and irrelevant once the mobile became a possibility. Information became an aphrodisiac and each Indian became a Magellan of his own world. Most boundaries became old fashioned as information trespassing became a way of life. It created odd situations such as the Indian interest in pornography. The body became a down-loaded object rather than something to be touched or talked to.

Once globalization can be down-loaded, the university qua university shrinks. Once you can download lectures, teachers are looked on like yesterday's newspapers. In a strange split, the university has to return to its older function of interpreting knowledge because information is available societally. The crisis of India is that we have the information revolution but not the knowledge revolution. We thrive on fragments of data while still locating them in old frameworks. India crashed into the information revolution while bypassing the knowledge revolution, the great debates in physics, biology, linguistics, the grand experiments about theories of knowing represented by Gregory Bateson, or the Macy Conference on Cybernetics, of learning to learn about information. A society caught with new data in old bottles becomes an epidemic of contradictions. It also seeks to invent its own frames. One sees this in everything from malls to democracy.

I am a mall watcher. Malls teach you about globalization and how Indians read it. A mall is a learning process. One discovers brands and learns brand literacy. Through brands, globalization is converted to dialects. By

sampling brands, one samples a different world. In fact, a middle class in a mall behaves similarly to the domestic servant with a mobile. It recodes the mall, rereads brand like a new pidgin, reworking globalization as a sensorium of perfumes, foods, wines and gadgets. It is a new literacy of the everyday which begins with wonder and window-shopping and ends in domestication. People visit malls as a combination of *jadu ghar* and sensorium. The mall becomes the new public space for dates, kitty parties, baby shows, discount discoveries, where an aspiring class discovers new and budgeted sensualities through food, perfume, and wine. The body-talk of brands is a new literacy. Clothes help reconceptualize the socialist body. The salesman becomes an intermediary of a new world where a mall miniaturizes the globe. Once you see commodity as quality, one wants quality in the service system, in the bureaucracy. Mall and bureaucracy become opposites in a consumer world.

Politics deals with state, bureaucracy, and development institutions. Our politicians treat these structures as stock to be mined, our movements treat them as a flow to be channelized. Nothing brings this out more clearly than the difference between party bureaucracy and the new social movements. The master move was by Aruna Roy and the MKSS (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan). Empowerment, they argued, was information. Participation, control came after that. Information was access and was primary. Information became a new way of defining citizenship. Access to information created new ideas of accountability and responsibility. It punctured the pomposity of power. For the elite, which once saw the right to vote as unnecessary, the right to information was even more threatening.

The politics of information rather than the NGOs set the tone for the new political agitations. They cut across governance, democracy, rule of law and read the state differently. They spoke a different language. If a Medha Patkar represents the last of the classic movements, such as the Narmada Andolan, the MKSS, the Anna Hazare and the Kejriwal movements represent a new challenge by hybridizing protest and legislation, by involving the new generation which was seen as apolitical. They are less ideological, more media friendly, more open to interpretation. Exemplars become paradigms combining a theory of livelihood, lifestyle and life choices.

Unfortunately, however, one sees them today as separate movements. Actually they are three variants which need to hybridize. Combined together, they will become the new force of politics challenging both party and bureaucracy with a new style of citizenship which will be more involved, more interrogative, built around more specific issues, and more aware of legislative possibilities.

One sees the same style in the critique of GM foods. These movements reflect an assortment of stakeholders, open to debate, creating connectivity through intellectual property and farmers' rights to the eventual fate of agriculture and democracy. The government attempts to reduce politics to the management of regulation as an expert affair. The movements establish

a ganglion of communities the regime cannot dream of, linking the politics of knowledge, livelihood and life, creating in the process new notions of expertise in citizenship. The future becomes a stakeholder in politics. The politics of the future is different from the politics of progress, which innovation advocates and biotechnology firms thrive on. My argument is that the germ of this new politics is present in these groups. They create a network of debates around specific issues and then open up a politics of complexity, which party and bureaucracy with their restricted codes, are not ready for.

One senses this from conversations, consumer surveys, futuristic scenarios, the gossip of malls, universities, buses, reactions to movies that ours is a society rife with and ready for new ideas, and new experiments. While society is open, our politics, once the most open of systems, has closed itself. Party and bureaucracy together have become a stalemate against the future.

The alleged battle between Rahul and Modi staged by the media is one such diversion. It seeks to buzz with new terms which masquerade as concepts, with rhetoric pretending to be new experiments. Behind the buzz of superficiality we have the same conspiracy of old concepts, summoning a society to uniformity and predictability – the arid ideas of security, development, nation state, technocracy, rule by management, the stale notions of stability and order which merely consolidate the old regime of ideas.

My sense of the future tells me that this is a temporary and desperate politics. It can disrupt the future, masquerade and mimic it, but it will have to eventually yield to the new politics and new leaders tentatively feeling their way into the future. The old model of the party as a coalition of corruptions, representative of the contractor-criminal-bureaucratic nexus will be edged out by new network groups working through a hybridity of tactics – street level, network, hybrid technologies. Occasionally one senses the Aam Aadmi Party camouflaging itself as an old group. One hopes it treats itself as a hypothesis of experiments with new forms of protocols, networks, competence building, new experiments in government, new forays into justice and equity. The more anarchic and plural these groups are now, the more liberatory they will be later.

There is a learning process one has to witness. I was thinking of two examples which can illustrate this. When young students protesting against the rape of Nirbhaya confronted water cannons for the first time, they sensed their own vulnerabilities and the violence of the state, the crassness of a regime interested in self-perpetuation. The protest against an administration indifferent to the rape of Gudiya witnessed an ACP (Assistant Commissioner of Police) slapping a young girl. At that moment, citizenship and vulnerability combined to show young citizens that since the state will not protect them, they have to stand up and fight for their rights. Parties and unions have little interest in these questions. But can we specify these questions and perspectives? How does the new India define issues? How does it see them being politicized?

The new generation has a different idea of problem solving. It does not want to depend only on the electoral system for a solution. It cannot wait long *durees* for a solution. It demands speed. These groups are clear that solutions have to be institutional, legislative and transparent. They want to see the change they have initiated. They want to re-visualize cities as service delivery systems. They are not interested in ideologies. Their sense of commodities and brands gives them a sense of materiality of services, the heuristics and systems required to deliver them. Thus education, science, and the city are all looked at as delivery systems.

Yet youth has made a transition from consumption to citizenship. While using the insights of consumerism to create a more proactive citizenship, their sense of citizenship is more interrogative in terms of governance. The emphasis is not only on equity but quality. There is no sense of deferred gratification which socialism inculcated but of immediate satisfaction. Politics is still performative, but performance is not a rhetoric of ritual but of delivery, logistics, access, quality. Institutions are seen in this secular sense as delivery systems rather than sacred spaces of access and value. Their connectivities are of a different sort. Their sense of body, sensuality, speed and problem defines democracy as a system of problem solving in a different way.

Democracy is secularized as a system of problem solving and citizenship genuinely becomes a set of entitlements. It does not see old institutions as sacrosanct. In fact, it is tired of parties, bureaucracies and seeks a new generation of alternatives. It is ready for democracy but also quite ready to alter institutions which fail to deliver. It is ready for experiments, especially around the city as a site. It sees corruption as a failure of problem solving.

We have a generation of citizens ready for new efforts in democracy and it is ready to follow leaders who can show this minimum integrity and competence. It is a citizenship tired of ideologies but ready for value frames. Democracy has to reinvent itself for this new set of expectations. The Congress, CPM, Trinamool, BJP are all outdated in this context. They represent the old political which denies the possibility of the new politics. We have a generation waiting for new notions of the university, new notions of medical systems, new ways of creating citizens. Old party ideologies and organizational frameworks will not do. Power will go to the politics that understands this and can exploit it. Oddly within this context a Rahul, or rather a Rahul tired of the Congress, might find it easier to adapt. He seems desperate to drop the old Congress baggage, keen to look at new ways of problem solving and democratization. His myth of a decentred Congress might have possibilities an ideological CPM or a fascist BJP do not. Modi's BJP offers little that is new. He offers a centralized statist regime which refuses decentralization or even diversity.

One does not see the new India respond with enthusiasm to the scenarios offered by the triptych of politicians. The dreams and issues are wider. One needs an imagination that looks at new issues in a new way. One thinks of

a new civics of the city which assures safety of public spaces to women and children, an experiment in governance which simplifies delivery systems making access to lower bureaucracies less painful, a politics which sees democracy both as a value frame and a theory for the delivery of entitlements, which returns to education its civilizational and economic value, which applies a notion of national dignity to patenting intellectual property, ready to challenge MNCs which deny access to health. These are issues which few politicians touch or are allowed to touch.

Our politicians might proudly play with new gadgets but they do not convert them into governance possibilities. They embody the idea of conspicuous consumption of information without visualizing its democratic possibilities. There is an impasse and sadness here but we have to wait a few years for politics to outgrow its old self. Possibly by then, one may visualize a new Tussaud's museum of politics which embalms the present, a goodbye to Manmohan, Sonia, Advani, Modi, Nitish, Rajnath, Uma Bharti, Karat, Mulayam, Shinde, Ajit and Sharad Pawar, Digvijay Singh, Ahmed Patel, Yeddyurappa, Raja, Karunanidhi, Mamata, where one can see them as objects of curiosity, but not as agents of an emerging politics.

