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STATES OF MATTER

The party is over

Defaulting on promises made to the disadvantaged may no longer be an option in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls



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The countdown to the world’s biggest election has begun. The pathway to the Lok Sabha elections in 2019 will be paved with contests in pivotal states and every outcome will be parsed for pointers towards the mood of the country. There have been instances when state elections have been a barometer to the mood of the nation, and an equal number where they have seriously misled.

Will India reaffirm its choices from 2014, since underlined by a right-wing tide sweeping across other countries that seemed comfortably settled into a liberal-democratic paradigm of politics? Or will there be a collective assertion of an alternative, however messy and muddled?

Over the world, the shift to the right presages not just changes in government, but entire political systems. Understanding the implications for India would require an authentic understanding of the system, beyond its characterisation as a parliamentary democracy. It would require an appreciation of the nature of political competition, which, in India, has unique attributes.

At one time, the competitive dynamics involved one party that could legitimately claim the mantle of nationalist consolidation, and a variety of others arguing their distinct cases. The political science doyen Rajni Kothari spoke in the mid-1960s (in an essay published in *Asian Survey*), in a spirit of optimism, about a “Congress system” that would remain an eternal feature of Indian democracy. One party, in Kothari’s forecast, would serve as the locus of consensus, while retaining the means, through processes of political negotiation, to co-opt dissent. These negotiations would not, by any means, be simple. Yet, through their complex trajectories, a fidelity would be retained — on the good faith of all participants — to the constitutional principles

of equality and fairness.

Kothari saw the Congress as the party of consensus that functioned “through an elaborate network of factions which (provided) the chief competitive mechanism of the Indian system”. Political competition would be “internalised and carried on within the Congress”, while the “secular involvement of sectional groups”, would “help in the articulation of the opposition”.

Groups working outside the margins of the Congress, Kothari said, would not “constitute alternatives to the ruling party”. Rather, their role would be to “pressurise, criticise, censure and influence it”. They would exert a “latent threat” that displacement from power would be the consequence if the ruling group were to stray “too far from the balance of effective public opinion”.

Probably swept up in the optimism of the time, Kothari may have been less mindful than he needed to be of BR Ambedkar’s warning from his valedictory address to the Constituent Assembly. With the adoption of a republican form of government, Ambedkar said, India was embarking upon a life of contradictions. On one side were the promises of equal value for all citizens. On the other, were the realities of inequalities in the social and economic realms.

Resolving the conundrum involved an active pursuit of redistributive politics, with all its potential to unleash discord. Infirmities of conviction soon transformed the Congress system from managing the secular demands of sectional groups, as Kothari saw it, into orchestrating a conflict of identities.

In 1999, as he witnessed the crumbling of the Congress system, political scientist (now activist) Yogendra Yadav observed that the “dy-

namics of political equality” as embodied in universal adult franchise, continued to collide with the “self-reproductive processes of the structure of socio-economic inequality”. Neither had been able to “tame the other”.

Political competition intensified through the ’90s, spilling beyond the capabilities of any single party in its complexities. Coalition politics became essential to constructing parliamentary majorities, while holding out the promise of inclusion for diverse constituencies. As accelerating growth rates through the first decade of this century enabled a potential escape from zero-sum politics, legislation affirming a number of positive rights such as employment, education and nutrition, became a distinct possibility.

The growth bubble did not last and a backlash against the politics it had enabled soon followed. For the first time in 30 years, a party emerged with a majority on its own in the 2014 elections. The years since have seen an effort to resolve the foundational contradiction in India’s republican order, through disenfranchisement and disenfranchisement.

The months leading to the 2019 polls will witness a consolidation of political parties opposed to the current ruling dispensation. The effectiveness of such an alliance would revolve around how coherently it is able to manage social coalitions of the disadvantaged. For many observers, 2019 looks like a juncture when substantive remedies will be demanded for the malaise of social and economic disenfranchisement. Defaulting on promises that are routinely made in the heat of political competition, may no longer be an option.

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