

SPEECH ON EMERGENCE AND IMPACT OF REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN INDIA

It is raining acronyms in politics and the vibrant Indian political landscape is flooded. Well, almost so as Regional parties gain ground with amazing alacrity in a diverse India where a fast-transforming political map now promises a never-before variety. SAD in Punjab on one side, SP, BSP in Uttar Pradesh on the other, RJD, JD(U) in Bihar as also DMK, AIADMK, PMK, MDMK and DMDK in the deep South and TMC, AGP and others in North-East —they seem to be flowing in from all nooks and corners to lend a different hue, their own hue, to the political waters as they flow in our country today.

EMERGENCE OF REGIONAL PARTIES

Though the experiment with regional politics first succeeded in the late 1960s when many parties won against the Congress, it was only post-1989 that regional politics really became a phenomenon, here to stay, courtesy the National Parties themselves. The alphabet-soup illustrating the striking transformation of India's politics over the past two decades, brewed on the fire provided by the space vacated by National Parties to be wedded to the cause of regional issues, local aspirations and territorial priorities. Also, shrinking space of the National Parties led to creation of a vacuum which the Regional parties were happy to fill. They sprung up and marched ahead as a consequence of the leanings of the public to advance its aspirations. Essentially individualistic, personality-driven parties bound by a loose chain of thought rather than a cohesive coordinated ideology, these pandered to regional populism with a much narrower vision of things sans any broad-based National consensus on ideology and issues.

ITS IMPACT

But, then, what did the mushrooming of these regional parties, finally, find reflection in? While it strengthened the federal structure with assertion by the States of the Union for its share in power, privileges, taxes, revenues and benefits of micro-macro schemes, it also led to a certain amount of healthy competition inter se states, making us the republic that we really are. It also gave rise to the concept of "shared sovereignty", marked by an increase in the capacity of the state to influence its own development performance while enhancing the representative character of India's democracy.

The relentless rise of these regional "home-grown" parties, sharing the one common attribute of having a mass base in only the state of their birth, led to a spate of constitutional and legislative reforms in terms of judicial, administrative and centre-state relations.

Not only this, it weaved together an interplay of forces, prompting National parties to not only rope them in for support but also brought about a dependence which lent a Regional flavor to National Policies. Then, it is in this that emerged the beauty of the dove-tailing of the National and these Regional entities.

But, then, since beauty is never blemish-free, there is a flip side too. Given their "strategic" positioning, the Regional parties have not only exploited this dependence of the National Parties for their own advantage but, at times, even arm-twisted the latter to get their way.

ROAD AHEAD

There's a way out of this labyrinth in which National Parties find themselves lost in and it does not lie in a top-down approach which, in the present times, seems not only inadequate but also outdated. We have an India defined by mobilization of a plethora of identity and interest groups which have taken the shape and form of Regional parties to diffuse real power from the Centre to the states. The National Parties need to wake up and smell the coffee. The crutches of dependence on Regional parties have to go and they have to not only learn to stand on their own feet but even walk that extra mile to fulfill regional aspirations to show that each one of the 28 states matters as much. For this, they must permit regional units to function at the local level as semi-independent units with adequate flexibility for leadership-building at the regional level. This will help balance the regional interest with the National interest which many a times end up conflicting with each other. Besides, a cohesive National party with semi-independent regional strait-jacketed unit to cater to regional interests is the only guarantee for ensuring continuous unification within India's multi-ethnic diversity which weaves the many strands of region, religion, culture and politics into one social fabric we call India. Randeep Singh Surjewala, Minister for Industries and Commerce, Parliamentary Affairs, Science and Technology, PWD (B&R), Haryana.