

Comparative-Functional Perspective on Politics in India

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The most important writing more than two and a half decades ago on Indian politics was *The Politics in India* by Rajni Kothari. Kothari incorporates in his perspective a semblance of modernization and politicization. Modernization of polity implies political development as a long term process assuming relative openness of the political system. Modernization does not imply non-incorporation of the legacy of a long tradition, historical culture, and social and cultural solidarities. Kothari is of the opinion that the social systems provided a key to social solidarity, hence transformation of social system must be a tune with new political institutions and opportunities, and legitimation of the new institutions must be sought in terms of the nature of the social system. Kothari very clearly explains that the context of political development in India is such that it seeks to incorporate into the womb the best elements of the culture of the modern world, without, at the same time, destroying its age-old traditions and diversities.

According to Kothari politics in India is pre-eminently the politics of integration, balancing, development and nationhood, against potential disintegrative consequences in a and highly diversified society. Such a process of political change and development would be no doubt slow and somewhat vague. Kothari writes : “The Key parameter is: What is precisely the mix between antecedent and enacted institutions that is developing in India ? How long it take before the traditional roots of Indian society succumb to the modernist onslaught ? Will they endure till the spiral of economic take off really takes off? And what would be the distinctive Indian mix between tradition and modernity that will survive in the future?” Kothari attempts to answer these questions within the framework of his comparative perspective. He analyzes the performance of the Indian political system from this interpretation of social institutions, political power and economic reality.

Kothari writes: “We have in our study, drawn freely on the tools provided by the functional school of comparative analysis, have added themes of structural transformation, political culture, socialization and reinterpretation of tradition as

correctives to the comparative myth, have employed the conceptual framework of centre and periphery in highlighting the issue of institutionalization and coalition making, and have introduced at some length criterion of performance and problem solving at various levels and in different sub-systems, of the polity.” Thus, Kothari employs in his comparative perspective both ‘modernization’ and ‘dependency’ models for understanding society and polity in India.

According to Kothari tradition and modernity are not incompatible and discrete opposites vis-a-vis the reality of development, political behaviour and interest group theory. There is a broad acceptance of behavioural approach combined with institutional approach and the role of elites. For Kothari political institutions are not some kind of a superstructure, nor are elites simple recipients of inputs from society. There is a process of constitutional and political superstructure which through the actions of elites penetrates into society at various levels and leads to new forms of power alignments. Kothari observes: “Elites and institutional forms can be seen here as creative actors in the process of integration and diversification, initiators of far reaching change in all spheres of life and as catalyst and mobilizers of a new vitality at varied levels. Politics is the great creative force in such a situation, not just a representative mechanism, which responds to outside pressures and aggregates outside interests.” Thus, Kothari’s analysis of politics in India does not base itself on India’s class structure, contradictions and class-based domination and subjugation. Role of new institutions and power elites and political parties is viewed performing systemic functions with regard to governmental and planning structure rather than competitions for political power.

Kothari elaborates on the need for a model relevant to the understanding of Indian polity. This model is not based on coercing individuals into new groups and directions. It is also not based on the transcendence of individual’s self-interests. It is mainly based on reconciliation of the interests of individuals and groups with the national interest and common good as interpreted by a legitimized elite in an idiom of persuasion. The arena of power is not

limited to a ruling oligarchy or an aristocracy of birth. Politics in India provides the larger setting within which decision-making regarding economic and social change takes place. The process of transformation is largely a political bureaucratic one in India, and in such a process a political orientation of social interest is quite evident. The striving for status gets politically oriented in terms of new criteria of status and power. By way of conclusion Kothari refers to the crystallization of a dominant political centre in the midst of plural identities and segmental distances. The new elite became spokesmen of such a model of Indian polity. The various pluralities and segmentations are incorporated in the dominant political centre. Hence, one can visualize a sort of organic hierarchy of power elite from centre to the village. Ultimately Kothari advocates for an effective stable political centre for the system's performance.

CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

Another important contribution by Kothari is *Caste in Indian Politics*, wherein he brings together several studies of Indian polity concerning the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In fact, the studies incorporated in this volume explicate Kothari's perspective of comparative functionalism to the study of Indian politics. Through these studies Kothari negates the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. He writes: "A modernizing society is neither modern nor traditional, it simply moves from one threshold of integration and performance to another, in the process transforming both the indigenous structures and attitudes and the newly introduced institutions and ideas." Kothari poses the question: "Is caste disappearing?" He answers that no social system disappears like that. A more relevant question would be: "What form is caste taking under the impact of modern politics, and what form is politics taking in a caste-oriented society?" A simple answer to these questions would be that if politics has a basis in society, then politics in India would have its basis in caste system.

Kothari does not find anything wrong with 'politicization of caste'. The forms of caste and the forms of politics cannot remain separate from each other. Politics is a competitive enterprise for the acquisition of power. Castes are identified and mobilized for the realization of power. Thus, caste structure provides a principal organizational support in politics. Kothari rightly observes: "Where caste itself becomes a political category it is futile to argue as to whether caste uses politics or politics uses caste."

Thus, Kothari negates a dichotomy between caste and politics. Factionalism and caste cleavages, patterns of alignments and realignments between the various strata and a continuous striving for social

mobility have always been a prominent feature of the caste system. This is what Kothari calls the secular aspect of the caste system and it is highly relevant for secular development in India. There is also an integration aspect of the caste system; as the individual's social position is determined on the basis of the group to which he belongs by birth. There are also other aspects of the caste system, namely, the governmental, the organizational, the political and the aspect of consciousness. Kothari takes an instrumental view of caste in relation to politics because of the secular, integrative and ideological aspect of the system particularly with regard to modern politics.

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