

The Grassroots Phenomenon

As the years have rolled by and discontent and disillusionment have grown, understanding of the democratic process has moved from an almost exclusive preoccupation with parties and elections to deeper currents at work which the polity has been unable to grapple with. The period of erosion of parliamentary, party and federal institutions and decline of the authority of the State and of the national political leadership has also been one of the rise of new actors on the scene, new forms of political expression and new definitions of the content of politics.

These new stirrings would have made the tasks of political management difficult even under fully functioning institutions of democracy. With the latter becoming weak and vulnerable to the rise of a highly personalised, *ad hoc* and arbitrary exercise of power, the tasks of governance have become unmanageable. With this there have grown deep doubts and skepticism, loss of faith and a diffuse sense of cynicism about the prevailing model of the polity, about the 'system' as a whole.

This model was based on a conception of politics in which the main initiatives came from one or more centres of power and decision-making, the benefits of which would accrue to the people whose role was periodically to provide consent or withdraw it through the electoral process. As a system of managing the affairs of society, this 'top down' model has failed. It is against this failure that the rise of new actors and levels, new forms of political expression and new definitions of the content of politics acquire significance.

New Actors, New Definitions

Who and what are these new actors, forms and definitions? There is, first, the resurgence of the 'people' themselves, both in consciousness and in behaviour, asserting their democratic rights and challenging the established order, at local levels to begin with but affecting the entire social and political order, though by no means anywhere near transforming it. There is, second, the emergence of a new social class of mediators in the political process, generally called the activists, upper and middle class in their social origin but identifying themselves with the lower orders of society—the poor, the oppressed and the segregated, a whole variety of constituencies ranging from the untouchable castes and the destitute among the tribes and ethnic minorities all the way to the victims of sexual, ethnic, ecological and generational discriminations, atrocities and violence.

As regards new expressions of politics, there is first, a new form of voluntarism that is *not* non-political but is political in a different way than are parties, aiming at ends different from the mere seizure of State power, in the process redefining not just the meaning of politics but also concepts like revolution and transformation. And there is, second, a new genre of 'movements' that, while having an economic content, are in practice multi-dimensional and cover a large terrain—the environmental movement, the women's movement, the civil liberties movement, movements for regional self-determination and autonomy, the peasants' movements, some of which (like the one in Karnataka) appear to transcend economics, and the still small and feeble but slowly gaining movements for peace, low military budgets and an anti-hegemonical stand *vis-a-vis* our neighbours.

The redefinition of politics that all this involves has again many aspects. First, it is an attempt to counter the major tendency towards depoliticisation launched by a populist leadership under which growing numbers of people are being marginalised both from organised politics and from the organised economy. Second, it is an attempt to widen the range and arenas of politics (when the overall tendency is to narrow the same), taking it beyond electoral and legislative politics which have led to a virtual exclusion of the mass of the people from the processes of power. Third, it is a redefinition of the content of politics so that fields of human activity that were so far considered outside the scope of politics are getting defined as political and provide new arenas of controversy and struggle.

The most outstanding instance of this is, of course, the women's movement which has brought up deeply personal and hitherto socially tabooed relationships into the political arena. But there are many other

instances, e.g., the whole issue of public health hitherto confined to experts, or of rights over forests and community resources so far kept out of the public realm by being separated from the more 'scientific' conceptions of ecology and technology.

Today, both the state of health and nutrition of millions of people and the disastrous ecological consequences of imported models of development for the very survival of people and cultures have become politicised thanks to the new actors and movements. The same can be said with regard to the role of the civil liberties movement in highlighting the plight of the homeless in the cities and forcing authorities to rethink their whole approach to the problem of shelter.

Multi-Dimensionality

Implicit in such new expressions and definitions is a conception of politics that, like the new radicalised conceptions of science and the arts, is multi-dimensional. Thus, whether it is the Chipko movement, or the Chhatisgarh miners' struggle under Shankar Guha Neogi, or the granite *satyagraha* in Kanakpura launched by the Raiyat Sangha (peasants' movement) in Karnataka, or the various Dalit movements in Maharashtra and Gujarat, the struggle is no longer limited to economic or even political demands but seeks to cover ecological and cultural issues as well, including a sustained attack on sources of 'internal' decay and degeneration such as drunkenness, filth and insanitary conditions of the environment and neglect and exploitation of children. All of which is reminiscent of the freedom struggle in which liberation and *swarajya* were sought not just from an external power but from the 'enemy within' as well.

Thus it is precisely this period of institutional decay and growing political vacuum that has seen attempts in a variety of local and regional settings which seek to come up with both a new understanding of the 'crisis' and new solutions. As said above, these new responses are not non-political; in fact they are more political than the prevailing forms. But they project politics of a different kind and involve actors and modalities that are neither part of the State apparatus nor part of the prevailing party space.

They do occasionally perform roles that were previously performed by the State (especially in regions where the State has either ceased to exist or has become an instrument of other interests), or by the government, or by Opposition parties and their various 'front organisations', but where this is happening it is largely due to the growing indifference of the mainstream political process to large segments of social real

ity. The real thrust of these new formations is in taking on new roles that have emerged in a changed context of national and international politics and in providing linkages with segments and layers of human life that were hitherto left out of the purview of the State and the polity.

Whatever the roles performed by these new expressions of the political spirit, both their emergence and spread and their capacity to provide creative space to others like them and, more than all this, their success in *intellectually* redefining the concerns of organised politics, suggest that they seek to deal with a fundamental crisis in the arrangement of the affairs of society, and of the State. Basic to a proper understanding of what in the last few years has come to be called the 'grassroots' phenomenon is the crisis of the State in our times.

Crisis of the State

I do not intend to dwell at any length here on the various facets of the crisis of the State.¹ We seem to be in the process of fundamental rethinking on the nature and role of the State and the theoretical postulates thereof. It is sufficient for my purpose here to say that the conception of the State as an instrument of human liberation and transformation of an egalitarian type is now in serious doubt, that in a period of stagnation and drift the State tends to be oppressive. On the other hand, under the impact of growing pressures the wielders of State power tend to cave in, grow weary and in the end compromise with vested interests. In the process they lose authority and leave yawning gaps in the writ of government and gradually hand over to technobureaucracy on the one hand and mafia rule on the other.

Further, such a combination of loss of autonomy of the State and decline of its authority also provides fresh ground to reactionary forces of communalism, sectarianism and religious bigotry, forces that have always swung into play in periods of decline of the political process, engulfing in their sweep the large mass of the people, a backlash that is more grassrootsy than the new stirrings of the human spirit and new definitions of politics that one has in mind when one talks of the 'grassroots' phenomenon.

Together, both the technocratic and the 'fundamentalist' perversions have rendered the Indian State into a no man's land, a playground for corruption, criminalisation and terror for the mass of the people and a cynical withdrawal from the political process on the part of the urban

1. I have done this in my *State Against Democracy: In Search of Humane Governance*, 1988, the first volume in the present series of books.

elite and the upper and middle classes in general. The result is large scale depoliticisation and a tendency to leave matters to a few dominant individuals and their authorised agents.

Such contradictory evidence of deep stirrings at the bottom of societies and erosion of the institutional fabric at the macro level, resurgence of the masses and of indigenous cultures alongside a concerted backlash from the *status quo* (both traditional and modern) determined to undermine the democratic spirit, point to a deep deadlock between contending forces, leading to a period of drift and anomie in the whole human enterprise. But, these very contradictions and the fact that neither the micro-movements by themselves nor the macro-system by itself can provide the basis of a way out of the impasse, point to the key issue in the current crisis: how to relate the movements for transformation to the political process of the mainstream, how to build on new creative spaces that have opened up as a result of the experiments and struggles at the 'grassroots' and at the same time resolve the deep dilemmas in which they find themselves, how to empower the whole 'bottom-up' process of social turmoil and at the same time contain it by reference to a larger vision and a conception of collective interest.

'Grassroots' As Catalyst

It is this situation of deadlock and exhaustion on the one hand and the need to recapture the old elan and commitment by taking cognizance of the new and the challenging on the other that provide the setting for making the 'grassroots' a catalyst of transformation—transformation of the mainstream to the extent that is still feasible, and where this is found wanting or insufficient, beyond the prevailing structure and institutions.

Speaking for myself, I have no doubt that left to itself the mainstream political process of parties and governments—including the recent spurt of regional politics—cannot rejuvenate itself. It is not that there is any dearth of recipes on how to perform economically or administratively. It is rather that such recipes can never be put to work in the absence of powerful political infusions from the very bottom of the social hierarchy. At the same time I also have serious doubts if the social turmoil at the 'grassroots' and the various new movements and groups of activists can by themselves provide the basis of a new dispensation.

This is where just as conventional politics needs redefinition, revolutionary theory also calls for a redefinition. On the one hand, the traditional theory of revolution was too conservative: it was perceived through the awakening and action of segments within the prevailing

structure (e.g., the proletariat); the revolutionaries were supposed to be inheritors of the power structure with a view to transforming it. Today the actions of the oppressed have to emanate from outside the prevailing structure. They are actions that are not any longer of dispossessing the possessed and taking their place: the revolutionary act is not an act of displacement any longer.

Yet, on the other hand, there are serious limits to the notion of simply destroying or blowing up the enemy by a violent act, of smashing the State apparatus and taking it over. It is at once more radical and more realistic to transform the nature of the State through a sustained step-wise strategy, in the process, redefining its rôle and recasting its structure. And to do this by simultaneously working at the 'grassroots' and mediating in the political process of the mainstream. Mediating from the bottom for recasting the top and the middle. And making the latter aware that the arena of politics extends far beyond the holding of elections and the operation of centralised parties and must take cognizance of both the new forms and the new content of the political process.

Unexpected Setbacks

There is another reason for such a combined strategy of autonomous action at micro levels and mediation in the mainstream. Time and again we have found that years of patient and sustained effort at local levels gets swamped by some unexpected emotional upsurge of a communal, linguistic or religious type. Despite all the inputs of social awakening and political education over time, the mass of the people get carried away by this upsurge. The same is the case with elections. Granted that ruling parties and their corrupt politicians are responsible for cornering the benefits of development for the upper classes and the need to organise the deprived and the poor against this, the work of the activists and the role of militant movements in this regard is also greatly appreciated by the people. And yet there comes an election and the same 'saviour of the poor' is found to sweep the polls. Or on the contrary some new saviour—increasingly less of a politician and more of a playboy—emerges and proves no less oppressive and *status quoist*. This happened in Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. It is very rare that a Hegde emerges. And even in his case the system may prove too powerful to allow him to be an agent of real change.

This happens largely because of the inability of the non-party political activists—and the intellectuals to make themselves felt in the politics of the mainstream as part of the longer term politics of transformation. It is imperative that this parallelism of the 'grassroots'

and the mainstream political processes, each oblivious of the other, gives place to a carefully worked out strategy of mutual reinforcement resulting in a gradual but effective change in the politics of the mainstream, including in the inner reaches of the game of power.

Mainstream in a Mess

But, above all, such a strategy is called for because the mainstream is in a mess. And it is in a mess because (apart from all other reasons) it has stopped responding to the social process, one that has undergone such a massive change over the last decade and a half. The result is that the interests and impulses that shape the mainstream power structure are at such variance from those that motivate and move the society and the people at large. Hence the spectacle of a ruling party that, despite all the presumed power at its command, is in shambles at every level and is sought to be kept together by a continuously rising input of money, and of an Opposition that is split into pieces in such a way that there seems to be no way of piecing it together.

The reason behind both these spectacles is that the process of power has become so autonomous of any ideological or programmatic moorings, let alone any 'social base', that it has lost all sense of purpose and has become devoid of even a semblance of accountability, whether this be to the general public or to internal organs of decision-making (or indeed even to one's own conscience). The rot is so deep that only major interventions from outside the usual political space can shake the party system out of its present state of both degeneration and drift. Failure to do this will only reinforce the other major tendency at work, namely, of giving a bad name to politics itself with a view to perpetuating the *status quo*.

These interventions have to be in the form of sensitising the emerging leadership to the new social reality (there is no way of mending the ways of the old and the tired lot), informing it of the quite considerable experience gained by the wide array of non-party activists and voluntary organisations (much of which the parties are unaware of), and joining in a genuine dialogue between two different and so far largely unrelated sets of observations, insights and actions.²

The 'mainstream' is greatly in need of these inputs. Both the depres-

2. For an early analysis of non-party politics, see the three articles by the present author, D.L. Sheth and Harsh Sethi in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, Nos. 5, 6 and 7, February 1984. My article was republished as "Decline of Parties and the Rise of Grassroots Movements" in *State Against Democracy*, *op. cit.*

sing experience of a long era of monopoly of power by a small elite and the intervening excitements of sudden changes in political fortunes have alienated it from social reality and made it truly rootless. Hence the at once opportunistic and oppressive nature of the political process. The need to restore roots to it is an urgent necessity.

Even in terms of the mere mechanics of mainstream politics, we face a situation of real deadlock. The Congress(I) cannot win a national election short of a catastrophic event preceding it. Nor can the Opposition. And, of course, neither can think beyond electoral prospects. Unlike the experience of the 'grassroots' movements, the policies of the mainstream have become unidimensional, confined as it is to electoral and legislative manipulation. The result is growing uncertainty and sense of insecurity all around. This state of stupor has to be overcome. And there lies the crucial role of a concerned intelligentsia in concert with activists at the 'grassroots'.

Opposition in Disarray

It is of particular relevance for the Opposition parties, so uncertain of themselves, so checkmated by each other into a complete deadlock, so utterly at a loss. It has taken so many years, since the collapse of the Janata experiment, to sort out the tangled 'leadership problem' to which there seems to be no solution in sight. Similarly, unable to face the fact that they must work towards an authentic politics of coalition-making, still muttering sentiments of total unity while in fact quarreling like adolescents over petty 'adjustments', it has nullified the whole process of providing a viable framework of an alternative to the Congress(I) and has, in consequence, made each constituent unit weaker and internally splintered.

Each of them knows that their collective discomfiture this time can gravely damage not just their future but the future of both democracy and national unity, that another term for the Congress(I), built largely on the basis of corruption and terror of local mafias, can spell disaster for the country. And yet they seem to be unable to do anything about it.

The reasons for this are (a) that there is no overall vision and sense of direction to take the country towards and on that basis work out a politics of transition and (b) that the ground experience needed for diverse groups coalescing for a common task without losing preferred identities and depth of regional and sectoral commitments is lacking.

On both these counts the activist groups and movements operating at the 'grassroots' have acquired a great deal of experience (both positive and negative) on the basis of which an authentic macro coalitional

framework can be constructed, in the process also locating the narrower politics of parties and elections in a broader canvas on issues and interests which in turn can also provide an appropriate climate for the work of non-party activists and voluntary bodies. The problem of fragmentation, sectarianism and mutual suspicion bedevil the action groups themselves. Only a common and concerted endeavour can lift both the Opposition parties and the action groups out of their common ills. And this can be done without compromising the integrity and autonomy—as well as differing aims—of either.

Issues Before the Activists

Two important objections to such a strategy for the non-party political formations that are working among the deprived and the oppressed strata of society need to be met. First of this is the fear of cooptation. All the work done at the 'grassroots' and on issues affecting the lives of the poor and the socially ostracised who have been forsaken by the political parties for long will go under if the non-party activists shift their attention 'upwards' and especially if they too get corrupted by enticements of office and privilege and change of lifestyle.

Even now one has constantly to struggle against such compromises with the administration and the lures and inducements of 'advisory' roles and committee memberships, or by simple offer of funds. Getting so close to the formal sector of power can undermine the integrity and autonomy of the voluntary sector. To this one can only say that, while such risks do exist, much depends on what one's own power base in society is and how much confidence one has in dealing with the so-called 'powerful' (so-called because much of their 'power' is based on make-belief). Ultimately, the question is who coopts whom.

I have sufficient confidence that the prevailing balance of forces in respect either of credibility or institutional base or even staying power favours the reverse process of cooptation, at least so far as Opposition politicians go, and one that does not necessarily have to be based on a sharing of positions as of an injection of new ideas and new definitions of politics as discussed earlier in this paper. The latter type of penetration should prove satisfying in itself, in fact more satisfying than occupying some puny office or position. (When a Shankar Guha Neogy attends a Janata camp of activists, the question is quite clear. It is clear from the fact that the Janata Party has advertised Neogy's participation far more than has Neogy.)

Personally, I wouldn't even mind if a few of the activists in the process of participating in the working out of an alternative political frame-

work decide to play a more direct role by joining a party or coalition. Indian politics is crying out for infusion of fresh blood, of men and women who combine honesty and integrity with first hand experience of ground forces and organisational skills. It all depends on how firm or gullible one is, what aims and objectives one has in mind, which organisational medium is best to realise them, what the effective *quid pro quo* is and why one is deciding one way or the other.

Ultimately, it depends on what is the most effective coalitional strategy for realising a truly democratic polity—at the grassroots, in party and government spaces, and in the wide array of intermediate levels between the two. The stakes are high and the sooner the overall picture of fragmentation and isolation which affects all levels and groups ends the better for all parts of the political process.³

There is a second and more serious objection, however. "Here you are talking of infusion from the 'grassroots' into the mainstream based on solid experience of work through creation of new forms of organisation and new definitions of the direction and the content of politics. But do you think *they* really care?" There is much force in this questioning of the very basis of the proposed strategy of meshing and inter-linking different levels and types of experience that are at the moment so alienated from each other.

Most Opposition politicians do not seem to care and this despite the fact that the ground under them is slipping. Left to their own devices, they cannot come out of the present deadlock and all possible spaces for manoeuvre will be eroded. Misplaced arrogance, lack of capacity to communicate with any but their own kin, and a curious capacity to miss opportunities that have presented themselves time and again, characterise the state of most Opposition party leaders.

Shrinking Spaces

There are two further handicaps: (a) distrust of 'outsiders' among the middle rung and the rank and file of most parties based largely on a sense of threat, and (b) the unavailability of institutional channels for necessary interaction and building of mutual trust and confidence. The monopoly of all institutional channels and of specialised interests—trade unions, peasant organisations, youth and women's bodies, associations of students and teachers, caste associations, organisations of

3. Since writing this paper new forces are at work that have posed the danger of cooption anew. For an analysis of this, see my "NGOs, the State and World Capitalism", originally published in *Lokayan Bulletin* and *Economic and Political Weekly* and since republished in *State Against Democracy*, *op. cit.*

Dalits, tribals and religious minorities—by political parties has left little room for a truly plural structure of political participation. To this must be added the increasingly blatant use of official patronage by the Congress(I) to penetrate these various sectors and the increasing resort to the use of money and grant of scarce resources for corrupting them all of which has led to an almost closed pyramid of access and participation.

It is precisely this situation that has led to so much of organisational activity taking place outside the system and outside the party space. Any new thinking on broadening this space and bringing activities and experience gained outside this space closer to it must deal with the doubt raised above on behalf of the activists. It calls at once for a blunting of egos and psychological edges, especially on the part of parties (but also on the part of action groups), and an organisational perspective that thinks of the whole process of coalition-making—the basic challenge of our time—in the framework of a truly open polity, both horizontally and vertically. Without this, all efforts at building coalitions between parties, much less the effort at building one united or 'federal' party under one agreed leader, is bound to fail.

There is another, and a more basic, reason why parties keen on real changes (not simply in control of the State apparatus but also in the social purpose that informs it) ought to seek a closer association with action groups and individuals working amongst the oppressed without insisting on their surrendering their separate identities, as also why the latter should be willing to relate to the mainstream political process without necessarily occupying formal positions in it.

Fast Changing Context of Democratic Politics

We seem to be already in the middle of a massive process of depoliticisation. The high pitch of populist rhetoric providing a cover for the reality of growing marginalisation of the populace with respect to both the organised economy and organised politics, the consequent erosion of the institutional fabric and growing dependence on dominant individuals—existing and projected—for key decisions and allocations, a series of measures aimed at reducing the role of the State in economic transformation and gradual incorporation of the national economy into the global market, all point to reducing the span of politics.

Politics is, in fact, being blamed for the current state of affairs and the 'new thinking' that is emerging in ruling circles is for minimising the role of politics and of public debate and handing over the affairs of the State to 'scientific' managers and technocrats and a new breed of 'advisors'—some of whom come from the voluntary sector itself! Aca-

democratic disciplines like economics and computer sciences are brought in to legitimise the new model. Those who are afraid of being coopted ought to know that in fact the process of cooptation has already begun and in a rather systematic way.

Much of the thinking of the group around Rajiv Gandhi, himself the archetype of people outside the political process being brought into the centre of it, is along such a managerial model of the polity that would take major areas of decision making out of the democratic political process. Whereas Sanjay Gandhi's model was based on penetrating the institutional as well as 'grassroots' bases of the polity through new political actors, mafia-style, assisted by the repressive arm of government, his brother's model is for a seemingly less ruthless approach, namely to replace political functionaries by managers, though for some purposes continues using mafia and police operations at the lower levels.

The new alignment of forces is likely to be conceived less in terms of political coalition-making or the consolidation of a social coalition, e.g., the well-known social coalition of Mrs. Gandhi's earlier years, and more in terms of a simple and straight forward manager-cum-mafia-cum-police *raj*.

Here lies the central task facing the democrats among us all (intellectuals, activists, politicians): to counter the designs of narrowing the range of politics by a strategy that broadens the base of the political process, makes it multi-dimensional, brings new issue areas within its fold and, as described earlier in this paper, redefines it. For this to happen it is crucial to draw upon the vast treasure of experience gained and forms of struggle waged by the non-party activists at the 'grassroots'.

The thinking behind the strategy of substituting politics by *technique* is not terribly new; it has been in vogue for a long time. In our own times it is what is meant by 'development' in many Third World countries. Marcos and Pinochet represent two versions of it. There are many others. What is new is that a country so committed to 'development through democracy' and one that had carved out for itself a different path should think like this. Namely, India.

The implications of this scenario for both the party system and the 'grassroots' political process are ominous. It is imperative that the Congress(I) is thrown out of power (including, one would hope, by saner forces within the party). For this it is essential that a workable coalition of alternative forces emerges. Failing that, we are in for a long dynastic rule that will 'regulate' democratic politics. And if that fails (which is quite likely), the emergence of a more ruthless alternative to Indira and Rajiv Gandhi cannot be ruled out. It is for moving towards a truly democratic alternative that all thinking and action will need to engage in.

This would still be a politics of transition and not of any major transformation. The transformation will have to build itself, brick by brick, through the transition. Recalling what was said above about the changed context of revolutionary politics, the need for taking the transition seriously and not waiting for something dramatic to happen is self-evident.