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It's sunset for the satraps

With aggressive regionalism and casteism losing out this election, a new federalism can be forged

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The year 2009 marked the end of the beginning for a certain kind of regional satrap who was central to the polity since the Congress lost the winter elections of 1989. The names and parties may have changed but for the most part, it was regional parties that held the key to power.



Illustration: Jayachandran / Mint

On one key occasion they also were the pivot of power in New Delhi. From 1996 to 1998, the regional parties in general and the southern formations in particular were critical to the United Front alliance. Keeping them company were the Mandal class leaders of the large northern states, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

The experiment did not last. It was, however, a role model for votaries of a Third Front on elections even in 2009. As it turns out, the concept has got a thumbs-down from the voters.

The Congress crossing the 200-seat mark for only the second time in two decades surely has implications for regionalism.

The scale and size of the victory of the ruling United Progressive Alliance has in part been enabled by a reconciliation of the Congress and regional parties. It was the ability of Sonia Gandhi to work in tandem with strong regional forces in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Maharashtra that enabled this victory in a poll where much could have gone wrong.

The larger trend of 2009 is clear: regionalism and identity politics yield diminishing returns

Yet, the surge of leads in the first hour of counting put paid to the ambitions of the Third Front to play a balancing role. Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh, a spokesman of Telugu pride, was unable to counter the ruling Congress record in agriculture and anti-poverty measures. Even the appeal of a separate Telangana did not stem the Congress tide.

More serious yet were the setbacks for the leaders of the Hindi belt who had

combined a deep sense of regional culture with identity politics: Lalu Prasad, who went out on his own, barely managed to save face. Mulayam Singh Yadav stayed at the top of the heap in Uttar Pradesh, but had to contend with a resurgent Congress.

This turn was not expected by most observers. The change as so often is the case has caught us by surprise. It might be added that the issue of regional disparity has vanished. Naveen Patnaik was quick to raise the issues of fiscal federalism soon after he led his party to a historic third victory in mineral-rich Orissa. Nitish Kumar, in turn, raised the issues of backward status for Bihar to enable it to have a greater share of resources.

Yet, here it is not the assertion of an aggrieved regional nationalism or "hurt pride" at stake. It is more an urge for better opportunity to participate in the process of wealth creation. The political economy of regional development rather than anti-Centre grandstanding is at the core of such an appeal.

It is still too early to give a definitive answer on why this change has come about. But it is an apt time to begin to explore why these trends are at work.

Three factors have combined to bring about the beginnings of the sunset. First, the rise of a new politics that puts a premium on governance and development. This is as true of Kumar as of Patnaik. Both have gained due to the image of being harbingers of growth.

Second, the ability of governments to deliver on the economic issues that matter most to the poor. The Re1 rice scheme helped the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government in Tamil Nadu to actually buttress its vote share even after several allies had deserted it.

Third, the resurgence of the Congress. Unlike in the 1980s when it rode roughshod over regional sensitivities, it is now willing to be more flexible. This has added to its own base even while allowing allies to flourish.

However, there is a rider and it is a serious one. There had been signs of such trends working their way through Uttar Pradesh. Yadav as chief minister in 2003-07 had stressed investments and his successor Mayawati placed emphasis on redistribution of land and better schools. Neither quite delivered. Despite setbacks, Yadav's Samajwadi Party and Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party still control just over half the seats in the state.

Mention must also be made of a state where strong regionalism is combined with religious and cultural appeal: Gujarat. Narendra Modi is not only a votary of Hindutva, but is also spokesman of a Gujarati *asmita*, or identity.

But the larger trend is clear. Regionalism and identity politics is yielding diminishing returns. There is more space for a politics of economic growth, provided it pays attention to issues of inclusion.

A cooperative federalism is the need of the hour. Voters do not endorse an aggressive and assertive brand of regionalism. Similarly, caste-based mobilization, which is highly region-specific, is also past the peak.

This is an opportunity and one created by the voters, no less. It is one that holds promise as India moves into the second decade of a new century. A moment to be prized and not wasted.

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