

UNIT 23 POLITICAL GROUPS: PRESS, BUSINESS STUDENTS AND FARMERS

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23.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the role of political groups in the Indian political system. Important political groups discussed in this unit are Business, Press, Student and Farmer groups. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the relevance and need of political groups
- differentiate between domains of group activity, and
- explain why the domain of certain political groups differ.

23.1 INTRODUCTION

A group consists of individuals with common interests. Each group works for some collective interest that by its very nature will benefit all its members. Thus, Labour Unions which are organizations of the working class to strive for higher wages and better working conditions for their members; farm organizations are expected to strive for better prices of agricultural products and reduced taxation.

It is generally agreed that group interests are the animating forces in the political process; an understanding of any political system requires a knowledge of the competing groups and their stakes in government policy. The exercise of power by any government hinges, to a large extent, on the fulfilment of group objectives. If groups do not find channels to express their interests and needs, they become dissatisfied. The viability of a political system rests on its responsiveness to such dissatisfactions.

Groups in the Indian political system occupy significant positions because of the strength provided by their organizational base. Business, press, bureaucracy, trade unions, rich peasantry are some of the important examples of such political groups. Some political groups like Business community have a tightly knit organisational infrastructure, which may not be the case with farmers and students who are loosely organised with selective pockets of tight organisations at the upper levels of the groups.

Organizations of farmers and students and women are often associated with political parties, groups and institutions. They may not always articulate the needs felt by their

members. Instead, they may serve only as instruments to mobilise support for the political parties which control them. This lack of autonomy for certain groups has serious consequences. It leads to domination by certain powerful groups in the political process and marginalization of others. The latter are the poor, marginal peasants, landless labourers, migrant labour, tribals and rural artisans. Similarly, in student movements, students with elite backgrounds have dominated the associations.

In this unit we will study the role and political dynamics of some important groups as they influence Indian politics. These groups under discussion are the press, business, students and farmers.

23.2 PRESS

Press is supposed to be an open and wide forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions. It implicitly refers to the existence and toleration of a variety of ideas and opinions. It believes that an ongoing discussion of ideas will eventually result in knowledge for the benefit of society as a whole. In order to play this role, the press tries to provide a rigorous, truthful and intelligent account of day-to-day events. A close examination of the actual functioning of the Press, however, reveals a different picture. It appears that the mainstream press has traditionally spoken to and for certain groups only. To a large degree, views of certain groups or events are ignored because they do not fit into the current definition of what is news. It is this need to communicate currently unacceptable ideas, that has led to the development of alternative forms of imparting news.

Governments often impose censorship on the Press. The Press is shorn of all rights as soon as its existence is made dependent on a government's views and opinions. Censorship particularly during peace time punishes opinions of individuals. It regiments the mind. It is not enough just to reform the censorship procedures or personnel because there is something intrinsically wrong with the philosophy of censorship as such.

23.2.1 Role of the Press

The role of the press generally is to keep the people well informed. The information should be objective and comprehensive on all aspects of the situation being reported. The press should also strive to create, sustain and encourage discussion of current problems with due regard to all points of view. Of course, this is not to suggest that the press directly determines peoples beliefs or behaviour.

It is essential that there be a variety of ownership and opinion, and newspapers present the different views espoused by political parties, groups, institutions and people. Moreover this task is a crucial one in a parliamentary system like ours where there has generally been domination by a single party at the centre. It becomes therefore all the more necessary that the press functions as an active extra-parliamentary opposition to the government and maintain our democratic institutions.

Today there are broadly three critical areas which the Indian press must tackle in a responsible way: a) Communal disturbances, b) Political agitations and c) Insurrectionary movements.

Ever since independence, we have had communal riots of very serious nature occurring frequently in almost all parts of India. While a substantial section of the press behaved with responsibility, some newspapers indulged in objectionable writing unsympathetic to the rights of certain communities. To our mind, the press as a group should refrain from sensational presentation on news on the outbreak of such disturbances. Once the situation is under control, an investigative analysis should ensue. The same can be said about insurrectionary movements and agitations which disrupt public life. But this is clearly problematic. For example, hostile attitude towards a community could be cited as evidence of an opinion. What should we say about this? Should the press retreat from high standards of objectivity or should it publish such views? We must remind ourselves that it is difficult to lay down any guidelines in this regard. The role of the press should therefore be to classify the news along many dimensions, in order to appear fair and responsible.

The problem can also be stated in the following manner: The press can be viewed as

arrogant if it ignores dissident groups or certain events. On the other hand, we might support a cautious press which conceals events from the public in the cause of social harmony. For this reason we need balance in news coverage.

23.2.2 Freedom of the Press

To enable the press to carry out its functions and responsibilities, it must be given free and independent working conditions. But there has been persistent opposition to such a freedom of the Press all over the world. The Indian Press has an interesting history of struggle against the arbitrary restrictions traceable mainly to colonial times.

The scene changed with the coming of independence and guaranteeing of freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right in the Constitution. The history of the national movement was so closely related to the freedom of the press that, a free press was regarded as an essential aspect of Indian democracy. While the need for a free press is recognized by all, the expression is still not clear. Broadly speaking, freedom of press means, the freedom of any periodical to contain public news or comments on public news. It can also be seen as the freedom to publish any matter without interference from any public authority, the executive, the advertisers and the pressure groups. Both meaning overlap considerably. But the latter meaning refers closely to the independence of the press.

We should view freedom of the Press as composed of basically three elements: a) freedom of access to all sources of information, b) freedom of publication c) freedom of circulation.

In our constitution, there is no separate provision for freedom of the press as in countries like the U.S.A. Instead freedom of speech and expression has been guaranteed as a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) available to all citizens. The Press has no special rights which are not to be given to, or which are not to be exercised by, the citizen in his individual capacity.

Moreover, freedom of the Press is derived from freedom of expression and as such, is not an absolute right. It is subject to restrictions on the exercise of the right of freedom of speech in interest of: a) sovereignty and integrity of India (b) security of the State (c) friendly relations with foreign states (d) public order (e) decency or morality (f) contempt of court, and (g) defamation.

It follows that the Press is subject to the same laws and regulations as are applicable to other citizens. Further, we also find that a company or a Corporation in India, which runs a newspaper, cannot claim the benefits of the freedom of speech and expression. The Citizenship Act, 1965 specifically provides, that corporations are not to be considered citizens.

23.2.3 Independence of the Press

Even when a newspaper is free to express its opinion without any restraint from the government, it cannot exercise its freedom unless it keeps itself independent. To be independent, a Press must be economically self sufficient. Dependence upon outside agencies, poses a threat to the smooth working of the Press which is implied in the editors' loss of autonomy. As you know, some newspapers are owned by commercial enterprises or industrialists who view the newspaper network as subsidiary to other interests, or as a means for exerting political pressure. The proprietor has the right to lay down the broad framework within which the editor must perform. In the process, certain news gets singled out as more crucial than others, and biases in the news become frequent.

In its survey of the functioning of the Press in India, the first Press Commission found that a large section of the Press was unclear and acted irresponsibly on certain issues. The Commission argued that the best way of maintaining professional standards was to bring into existence a body of people, who would arbitrate on controversial issues and censure any one guilty of violating code of journalistic ethics. The Press Council was set up to safeguard the freedom of the Press and also to encourage a sense of responsibility. Among other functions, it acts as a quasi-judicial body sitting as a court, to enquire into complaints against violation of journalistic ethics. Its contribution has not so far been as significant as

was expected. But it is a very useful institution and can play a significant role in maintaining and improving the freedom of the press.



A slight change, Sir. He says he likes to attack the press and suggests that you attack the business community instead!

Courtesy: R.K. Laxman

23.3 BUSINESS GROUPS

The rise and growth of business groups is linked with the expansion of trade, commerce, industry and banking in India. This group comprises commercial, industrial and financial interests.

Under British rule, production for the market expanded fast and along with it, a large merchants class emerged on the Indian economic scene. The main grievances of the Indian merchants was against the preferential treatment given to European business and undue restrictions put on Indian trade with non-British countries. It was, however, the industrialists who presented a more coherent opposition. This newly emergent class felt that by subordinating Indian capitalist development to the interests of British capitalism, the British government has restricted the basis upon which industrial mode of production could develop in India. Broadly, Indian economic development was subordinated to the requirements of British industries in three ways: a) it was under the control of British capital investment, b) Indian industries were never allowed to compete on equal terms with British ones, c) Indian market was controlled by British manufactures.

23.3.1 Political Organization

In India the position of the business community was an ambiguous one. During the British rule, they had to choose between collaborating with a colonial regime that could provide immediate economic benefits and supporting the anti-colonial nationalist movement. In the post-colonial context, business groups have had to work with governments which were concerned with promoting the public sector and critical of private enterprise.

Two views have emerged in this context: one view is that government in the post colonial context, exercises excessive control over the economy. The nationalization of the airlines, the Imperial Bank and Life Insurance the imposition of high taxes and innumerable regulations on business are taken as examples which illustrate this. The second view, argues, that business as a group wields undue power in the Indian political system and that socialism is found only in party speeches and is more of a convenient rhetorical device for politicians and ministers.

Which view is closer to the truth? Is the Indian government socialist?

The political role played by business is intimately tied up with the development and role of organized business associations. Business associations in India date back to the early 19th century. The leading business association was a Chamber of Commerce founded in Calcutta in 1834. With the promotion of tea, jute and coal industries by Europeans in India, new trade associations developed. In the 1920s and 1930s associations were formed of jute mill owners, paper mill owners and growth of associations in the field of engineering, manufacturers of woollens textiles and automobiles. There also emerged at this time, associations representing a number of diverse trades and industries in a given region, or province. The first significant association was the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce in 1887 to aid the development of commercial enterprise in Bengal.

Two other important regional chambers were: The Indian Merchants Chamber of Bombay (1907) and the Southern India Chamber of Commerce (1909). Industrial and commercial entrepreneurs were also organised along community lines. This is reflected very well in the case of associations formed by Marwaris, Muslims and Parsis.

Though organized business generally supported the national movement, they did not control the movement. Even then, Indian business organizations sought to influence government policy. They demanded protection for industries, more credit facilities and lower taxes. Business magnates like Pheroze Sethna, Homi Modi, F.E. Dinshaw, and Thakurdas had learnt to rely on friendly negotiations and gentle persuasion to achieve their ends. Some of the members of this group were directors of companies managed by European managing agencies; some of them served as members of the Viceroy or the Bombay Governor's Council. For six years Modi was chairman of the Bombay Millowners Association in which European interests were also represented. Generally speaking, members of this group avoided direct confrontation and preferred the peaceful constitutional path.

But on the whole it was no smooth sailing for the business groups. The British government pursued policies which protected their own economic interests. Indian business then turned their attention towards the national movement, in the hope that an independent India would adopt policies sympathetic to them. Moreover, the programme of Swadeshi and its promise of speedy economic growth was attractive to business groups. In fact extremely friendly relations existed between the business interests of the different groups and the Gandhian leadership. Even those who actively opposed Gandhi's mass action programmes, helped him and the Congress through other means—the most significant being the provision of funds.

After independence, the Congress regarded both private and public sector as indispensable for economic development and modernization of India. While the business groups approved the development programmes envisaged by the Five Year Plans in general, they attacked many of the specific provisions. The government in its turn felt concerned to maintain law and order, and provide an atmosphere for economic growth and an expanding role for the private sector.

That big capital should concur with bank nationalization without too much fuss is clearly suspect. Ownership of banks has been important in extending industrial empires. But the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry did not react too strongly over the issue, and extended support to Mrs Gandhi after the nationalizations in 1971.

The Mahalanobis committee drew attention to the way in which money deposited by people had been used for purposes of intercorporate investment and acquiring control of companies. Somewhere bank nationalisation also reflected the interests of small capital. This became evident after nationalization. The banks were now expected to fund sectors such as export, agriculture and small industries and trades. From June 1968 bank loans to small scale

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industries rose rapidly. To some extent, the leverage of big capital over the Indian state has diminished owing to enhanced position of smaller business groups and the existence of a large sector of public ownership.

23.3.2 Techniques of Business Groups

Business organizations before independence had access to government through two channels: representation in consultative bodies and in legislative assemblies.

In the post-colonial period, business representation on government consultative bodies continued. But now emphasis is laid upon contact of an informal sort through which business groups gained access to government officials. Quite often government officials are invited to attend their annual meetings or to meet their executive boards.

Lobbying, in the sense of attempting to influence members of parliament or state legislative assemblies plays a negligible part of their group activities. They neither conduct public relations campaigns, nor have demonstrations. Yet we find that business interests in India, while not directly represented in competitive party politics, are better represented than other groups in bureaucratic, parliamentary and party processes. In a parliamentary system like ours, successful lobbying is done at the executive rather than the parliament level. The latter plays a limited role in the formulation and implementation of policy—tasks which have been appropriated by the cabinet. We find that business interests have adopted various methods to influence policy at higher levels. For instance, they establish particularistic relationships with individual administrators, which are facilitated by traditional ties of family, community or personal friendship, but most often by financial rewards. *Bakshish*—a non-legal fee for the performance of administrative duty—is frequently given in return for permits and licenses. Contributions to the party in power also serve to facilitate political access.

Through these techniques, the business community greatly influences how the government applies and implements the various controls and regulations that affect their economic interests: investment, foreign exchange and collaboration, and pricing. However, business has never succeeded in modifying or displacing any major distributive policy in India. It can handle unfavourable policies by cultivating personal contacts, and employing lobbyists. The ability of this group to manipulate the state system of control to their advantage shows the strength of the business group.

Check Your Progress 1

Note : i) Use the space given below each question to give your answer.
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1 Can you identify some business organization?

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2 Which techniques are used by business groups to influence government policy?

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23.4 STUDENTS

Students have become an important social group in Indian politics. They became visible as political actors in the struggle against colonial domination. University students were an important support base for the national movement.

The achievement of independence has changed the nature of student activity. Prior to independence, issues were clear. The British Government had to be overthrown, and radical social change had to be instituted. But we find today, that student unrest is based on local issues focussing on university problems or local political conflicts, rather than on broader questions. In addition, when students have agitated, their activity does not have implications for wider social change in society. Students were active in the *Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti* which demanded a separate state the 1965 language agitations in Madras, in food shortages of 1965-66 and in Jaya Prakash Narayan's drive for total revolution in North India in the early 1970s. In the 1980s students collaborated with regional movements in Assam and Punjab. All Assam Students Union has even succeeded in capturing power in Assam where the AGP government is being led by the then AASU president and general secretary Mr. Profulla Kumar Mohanta (Chief Minister) and Mr. Bhrihu Phukan (Home Minister). Similarly the role of All India Sikh students Federation in the recent political turbulence in Punjab is well known. Arguably though, none of these student movements induced basic social transformations. In this sense the student movement in India is different from the one witnessed in the late 1960s in various industrialised countries.

An aspect of student life, which has major implications for student activism, is the politicisation of universities. By politicization, we mean, the involvement of various political groups in the affairs of a university. Two types of interference can be identified. One is interference by government authorities specially at the state level. The second is by factions of political parties. It is found that student unions in some universities are controlled by ideological factions attempting to use the Union as a base of operation against an opposition political group within or outside the university. Political parties have not hesitated to use student unions for their purposes. In return, students have realized that leadership in student organisations is the path to an elected office.

PARTY OFFICE



He says he can't read—I told you to keep students out of politics!

Courtesy: R.K. Laxman