A Handbook of State Politics

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It was from the pages of this journal that the regionalisation of the Indian polity was announced in 1996, following a series of state assembly elections in the preceding few years. In the decades that followed, the salience of the states in the Indian polity and economy increased, with regional parties becoming crucial to government formation at the centre. Many chief ministers and leaders of regional parties publicly set their sights on the highest political office in the land. It is ironical that this office has, for the first time in two decades, come to be held by a former chief minister, though not one from a regional party, and at a time when regional political parties could not have counted for less in government formation at the centre.

The publication of the Oxford India Handbook of Politics in the Indian States fills a gap in a surprisingly sparse field of scholarship. There have been few edited volumes that examine the experience of multiple states in a more or less comparative vein. In the early years, Iqbal Narain (1976), Myron Weiner (1968) and John R Wood (1984) edited such books, followed in 1989-90 by the two-volume study edited by Francine Frankel and M S A Rao of the caste and social bases of political dominance in the states.

In more recent times, such volumes have been thematic: prominent examples being the state-wise analysis of election results by Palshikar et al (2014) or the state-level experiences with special economic zones (SEZs) edited by Jenkins et al (2014). But there has been astonishingly little published on state-level politics commensurate with its empirical salience. Even the four-volume survey of literature commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science Research in 2013 has one essay on Indian federalism, but none on state-level politics per se.

The Oxford Handbook series is a sound platform from which to make good this deficit, and in the competent editorial hands of Sudha Pai who has written extensively on politics in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and the rarely studied state of Madhya Pradesh (MP). The articles included in this book were originally published between the years 1985 and 2010. These are, of course, the years when the Indian polity became more federal, albeit inadvertently so, and when the Indian states became more autonomous, launching innovative experiments in development, reforms, public service delivery and even welfare programmes. If some of the treatments in this volume nevertheless have a slightly dated feel, it could be on account of the rapidity and dynamism of political and economic change, and perhaps also the still nascent scholarship on recent political developments.

State Reorganisation History

In her introduction, Pai identifies two important trends: the emergence of a common arena of state politics and the “relatively autonomous” political arena that each state has developed over time. However, it is the second trend that informs the selection of 22 articles in this volume, which are organised in terms of four broad thematic: the history of state reorganisation; political parties and electoral politics; social movements; and economic reforms. Through these various rubrics, the volume brings into focus the politics of chiefly eight states: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, UP, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, along with an essay covering the states of the North-East.

A handful of articles deal with multiple states in a comparative frame: Rob Jenkins on “Special Economic Zones”, E Sridharan on “the Coalition Strategies of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)”, Sanjay Kumar on “the Survey Evidence for Regionalisation”, and A K Verma on “the Decline of Backward Caste Politics in North India”. The only chief minister to be the focus of an article is Chandrababu Naidu, and to a lesser extent, Nitish Kumar. Regional leaders like J Jayalalithaa or Digvijaya Singh, who have been powerful sponsors of reform and new initiatives, do not figure here.

Telangana’s newly minted statehood gives a particularly topical edge to Asha Sarangi’s critical reading of the deliberations and report of the States’ Reorganisation Commission (SRC) on a state-by-state basis, its rationale for decisions on bifurcation and unification, and its views on a range of considerations from language and culture to size and administrative efficiency. Both the commission’s endorsement of a common citizenship and its cautionary statement that “if the principle of self-determination were to govern the internal reorganisation of states, every linguistic or other minority group might demand a state for itself”, (p 47) have resonance today.

Notwithstanding the sentiments expressed by the src, it is indisputable that forms of internal reorganisation have frequently been used as an instrument for containing ethnic conflict. This is true not only of Telangana, but also as Maya Chadda argues, of the creation of Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh which represent the electoral calculations of political parties.

This is a point amply elaborated in the essays on the formation of Jharkhand by Stuart Corbridge and of Uttarakhand by Emma Mawdsley. Stuart Corbridge convincingly interprets the creation of Jharkhand as a “detrabilising” political project that has ignored the claims of poor adivasis to land rights. While this is suggestive of the rising tide of Naxalism in Jharkhand, neither of these states nor their sibling Chhattisgarh, find discussion elsewhere in the book.

This leaves us with an abundance of creation narratives, but sadly no analysis...
of the more recent and often-troubled histories of politics and governance in these young states, let alone productive comparisons amongst similarly sized states, old and new, or even between smaller and larger states. The only article that revisits this question is by Sajal Nag on the states of north-east India. Nag argues that their small size means that Lok Sabha elections are not very important in these states and the ritual performance of electoral politics is explained by the stake that corrupt political elites have in democracy. A handful of Members of Parliament from the North-East tend to form lobbies to influence policy on the margins of Parliament.

Parties and Electoral Politics

The second part of this book discusses electoral politics and political parties, regional and national. Mapping three phases of mobilisation in UP – from the backward-caste movement to Hindu nationalism to dalit assertion – Pai argues that identity politics have given way to nationalism to dalit assertion – Pai argues that identity politics have given way to the centrality of development. This binary has formed the standard trope of Indian political discourse in recent times, but appears to have been transcended, in the triumph of the BJP in UP by an unanticipated and successful combination of Hindu nationalism and promises of development.

Implicitly disputing Pai’s cautious optimism about the possibilities of a Congress revival in UP, Sanjay Kumar argues that the revival of the Congress, except in a few states, is unlikely. He interprets the National Election Survey data from the last six national elections to offer a more sanguine thesis than appears presently, plausible about the enduring importance of regional parties in national politics. By contrast, E Sridharan’s hesitation to commit to the hitherto dominant narrative of two broad coalitions appears prescient, as he analyses the strategic coalitions formed by the BJP, 1989-2004, enabling its expansion in 10 states where it had previously been weak.

It could be argued that the strategic combination of identity politics and a developmental agenda may have borne national fruit for the first time last year, but has delivered results at the state level for a long time. This thesis finds affirmation in the exploration of forms of populist politics in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. K C Suri’s biography of the Telugu Desam Party documents its journey from “dominance to disarray”. Chandrababu Naidu initially consolidated the party through a clever combination of (NTR’s) populist welfare measures with liberalisation and market reforms, but could not sustain this tightrope walk and was eventually consumed by organisational dissension and ideological hollowness.

John Harriss and Andrew Wyatt’s account of Dravidian populism claims that it helped transcend identifier cleavages of class, caste and gender. It is insufficiently recognised that, populism notwithstanding, Tamil Nadu has done much better than most states, even better than the much-vaunted Gujarat model, on both growth and human development indicators. The resilience of the Dravidian parties and the lack of support for the Congress and the BJP remain a constant in Tamil Nadu, clearly a state that rewards the scholarship of its analysts with longevity.

The Problem of Caste

Edited by

SATISH DESHPANDE

Caste is one of the oldest concerns of the social sciences in India that continues to be relevant even today. The general perception about caste is that it was an outdated concept until it was revived by colonial policies and promoted by vested interests and electoral politics after independence. This hegemonic perception changed irrevocably in the 1990s after the controversial reservations for the Other Backward Classes recommended by the Mandal Commission, revealing it to be a belief of only a privileged upper caste minority – for the vast majority of Indians caste continued to be a crucial determinant of life opportunities.

This volume collects significant writings spanning seven decades, three generations and several disciplines, and discusses established perspectives in relation to emergent concerns, disciplinary responses ranging from sociology to law, the relationship between caste and class, the interplay between caste and politics, old and new challenges in law and policy, emergent research areas and post-Mandal innovations in caste studies.

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The politics of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) could also be interpreted as a form of ethnic populism. Sandhya Goswami attributes the AGP’s failure to lead a multiethnic society to the lack of a coherent ideology. But this is surely also an object lesson for parties that acquire power on divisive, even xenophobic, agenda and are faced with a conundrum: if they reinvent themselves more inclusively, they lose their ideological distinctiveness and risk their electoral base; if they continue to practise divisive politics, they must remain content with lower and less reliable political returns.

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya’s essay on the Left in West Bengal (the only article that has an epilogue bringing the piece up to date) ventures an interesting conceptual departure. Building on Partha Chatterjee’s idea of political society, he proposes the concept of “party-society” to describe the pervasiveness of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M) – in rural Bengal. He traces the breakdown of party-society to its inability to go beyond its accumulated stock of ethical capital in the form of land reform and to its imbrications in the structural logic of state power. Ultimately, however, the electoral defeat of the CPI(M) was chiefly due to its capitulation to morally dubious methods of achieving developmental goals.

Social Movements

The politics of social movements is the focus of Part III of this volume which is, for the most part, about caste-based movements. A K Verma claims that backward caste politics has declined in the northern states of UP, Bihar and MP, due to its elite leadership, and signals its replacement by a new “subaltern” class politics. Class is here defined as economic rather than social, but it is not always clear why it is sometimes posited in contradistinction to caste, and at other times defined in terms of the most marginalised caste groups, including the mahadalits and pasmanda Muslims.

Badri Narayan and M S S Pandian contribute essays that impart nuance to the standard categories of political repertoire. They point to the need to differentiate the category of the dalit in the light of different histories of empowerment and disempowerment in UP, and the distinctive experiences of caste violence among strata of dalit (and backward caste) society in Tamil Nadu. Sohini Guha’s article on the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) reaffirms Narayan’s argument about the disempowerment of the Chamar poor, but shows how, despite its multiethic turn, the BSP managed to retain the crucial support of this group, based more on their expectations of reservation benefits rather than their actual delivery.

This clutch of articles compels the observation that the study of Indian politics has not sufficiently interrogated and disaggregated the complex categories of caste and class, and their interrelationships, leading to formulaic interpretations trapped within mechanistic and unchanging frameworks of understanding.

Economic Reforms

The fourth and final section of the book is on economic reforms and state politics. This section reproduces Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph’s iconic essay (first published in EPW in 2001) on Chandrababu Naidu, and the emergence of a federal market economy in India with the Government of India playing a supporting and ocassionally constraining regulatory role. It is notable that they extend their description of the chief minister as political entrepreneur to only two other chief ministers, S M Krishna and (counter-intuitively, as they themselves say) Jyoti Basu.

Jos Mooij’s more updated account of the politics of reforms in Andhra Pradesh argues, contra the thesis of reforms by stealth, that hype can create momentum for reforms even as stealth is useful for welfare populism; that political skills are essential to reconcile contradictory interests and rhetoric; and that successful reforms must cater not only to the interests of social classes who benefit from them in the short run, but also to the aspirational interests of classes that may benefit in the future. The last element is echoed in Chirashree Das Gupta’s careful statistical puncturing of the hypothesis of the “Growth Miracle” of Bihar and its attribution to the sushasan (good governance) of Nitish Kumar when he was chief minister. Her account of Bihar’s growth trajectory traces its origins to the mid-1990s that saw the beginning of “diversified patterns of accumulation through the agency of new entrants to accumulation as an outcome of the social justice movement” (p 377).

In one of the few truly comparative pieces in this volume, Rob Jenkins’s essay on sezs as forms of “state capitalism” examines evidence from a number of states – at one extreme, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, both states where sezs have not been opposed, at the other extreme, Goa, where the protests led to the scrapping of sezs altogether, as well as a range of mixed cases in between. This diversity of state-level experiences is echoed in Baldev Raj Nayar’s argument that the increased inequality and state disparities occasioned by globalisation are better represented as located on a continuum than as a polarity.

Paï’s Handbook should stimulate similar efforts that encompass the many states largely excluded from this volume – including but not only Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, MP, Odisha, Maharastra, Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir – as also more studies that compare even two or three states with each other. It is also to be hoped that, in future editions of this book, the Oxford University Press will rectify the shoddy copy editing and egregious grammatical errors that are distinctly unworthy of this great university press.

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REFERENCES


