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# THE POSSIBLE COURSE OF DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC POLITICS IN NEPAL COMPARED WITH SELECTED INDIAN STATES

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**A B S T R A C T**

This paper argues that in the short term, there is not that much scope for ethnic politics in Nepal for two major reasons – ethnic groups in the country are not very politicized and there are not too many resources available to fight over. The present fight over 'identity' has been waged in an abstract way, and not in a concrete way. However, there is much scope for politicization and there are likely to be conflicts over resources in the future. Thus political parties should keep this in mind. A comparison with the situation in neighboring India can reveal the extent of the problem because the problem of identity also exists in India. However, there it has been waged far more successfully primarily because the stakes (resource redistribution) are much higher. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the situation in the two countries and suggests ways in which Nepal might learn from the Indian experience.

**Keywords**: Politics, Resources, Identity, Ethnicity, Ethnic Politics, Nepal, India, South Asia, Communal, Communalization.

## INTRODUCTION

Nepal and India are both ethnically diverse countries. Yet the modern political history of these countries has been qualitatively quite different. India became independent from the British in 1947 and immediately embraced democracy. Nepal, on the other hand, had to wait for four more years to become a democracy; however, its experiment with it was short lived and failed after a few years.

India went on to become a linguistic federation. Yet, even its post-independence political structure was not acceptable to many groups and they continually began to agitate for their own states, which would have its own language. The present day states of Gujarat and Haryana were carved out from the states of Bombay and Gujarat in this manner. Similarly the present day states of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu once all belonged to the vast state of Madras. What is important to remember is that *each* of these newly created states was determined on the basis of language.

By contrast, Nepal remained a unitary state, even as agitations espousing linguistic aims, some quite violent, were being carried out. Unlike in neighboring India, no other language other than Nepali, the language primarily of the Chhetri and Brahmin elite which had ruled the country ever since it was created was given much importance. Two main identity based movements have occurred in Nepal – one based in the southern Terai plains, and the other in the hills. This paper is concerned with the latter – the ethnic movement in the hills. The main research question that this paper is concerned with is whether the Maoist party can succeed in capitalizing on the discontent felt by hill ethnics against the Brahmins and other high castes which have been ruling the country till the present date? A secondary question is whether scope exists for other ethnic parties to capture a share of the popular vote as is the case in India. Towards this end, this paper examines both the relation between the Maoist party and ethnic groups in Nepal and the success of ethnic parties in state elections in three key Indian states. As India's states are very large in population terms it makes more sense to compare Nepal with these states rather than India as a whole.

## WHAT IS AN ETHNIC PARTY?

An ethnic party is one that appeals specifically to one

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subset of the population and excludes others, using the criterion of ascription, and uses this as its central method of garnering votes (Chandra, 2004).

**CASE STUDY OF NEPAL**

**Ethnic activism in the state before 1990:** Although Nepal remained a dictatorship for most of its history up until 1990, there are many instances of opposition to the state. There were as many as 25 ethnic or regional uprisings against the state between 1770 and 1979, with the Kirantis of eastern Nepal being active in at least 10 (International Crisis Group, 2011).

Kirant region lies in Nepal's far east, and the indigenous people of that area, the Kirantis, are divided chiefly into two groups – the Khambu (Rai) and the Limbu. Kirantis long lived communally, until migrants from other parts of Nepal (chiefly Brahmins) put pressure on their land and resources, thus sowing the seeds of future conflict. In fact, after Nepal became democratic for the first time in 1951, its eastern hills witnessed some acts of violence directed by Kiranti activists against Brahmin communities. (Subba, 1999).

**Activism after 1990:** Thus, before 1990, Kirantis led the many ethnic or regional uprisings against the Nepali state. The situation after 1990 remained much the same, although peaceful as well as more violent means were applied.

Yet, Kirantis were not the only ethnic group which sought the expression of their views and ethnic mobilization affected many and took various forms. A broad-based ethnic 'front', created to address ethnic interests, NEFEN (Nepal Federation of Nationalities, which later became NEFIN, Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities), was created. Ethnic elites began to take more interest in their language, history and culture. Ethnic activists began to petition the Supreme Court to address linguistic and ethnic-related issues. In some ways, the 1990 Constitution acceded to their demands, but in many ways it did not. For the first time in its history, the Constitution of Nepal described the country as 'multi-ethnic' and made special note of the linguistic diversity of the country. However, ethnic activists were hoping for much more and felt that the changes were too little. They decried the fact that Nepal was called a 'Hindu' state and that Nepali was the national language. They also decried the fact that the Constitution did not specifically mention that ethnic communities had been disadvantaged. In 2004, on the occasion of World Indigenous Day, NEFIN placed a 32-point demand, which included support for economic, ethnic and cultural autonomy, affirmative action, and equitable distribution in all state institutions (Subba, 2006).

Thus, the post 1990 political situation in Nepal was marked by a general sense of hope among ethnic activists that they could begin to get the state to address what they considered to be 'historical grievances'. Yet at the same time, another movement, of a different sort was being spearheaded in the hills of western Nepal. This was the Maoist movement. However, the aims of these two separate movements were not that different in that both wanted to give greater political 'space' to historically marginalized elements. In fact, although Nepal's Maoists were from the outset not driven by the same class-based interests that characterizes communist movements. They started their movement in the hills of west Nepal, in the districts of Rolpa and Rukum among the Kham Magars. Not only did, from the outset, the Maoists see Kham Magars as an underclass, but they also actively promoted their culture and history.

In the years 1996 to 2001, the Maoists solidified their hold over western Nepal, but they had minimal presence in the eastern region, where the Kiranti people (Rais and Limbus) are indigenous to the area. The Kirantis, as stated earlier, have a history of opposing the state, and sometimes perpetuating violence against Brahmin migrants, and after 1990 it was no different. In the early 2000s, Kirant activists targeted state symbols and also attacked Brahmins (International Crisis Group, 2011).

**THE MAOIST USE OF ETHNICITY**

The Maoists began their war against the state in Nepal's western hills, far away from the Kiranti territories. The people of these hills have been far less active in carrying out ethnicity based insurrections against the state.

The Magars are the largest ethnic group of Nepal which lives in the western hills. The Kham Magars, a distinct subset of the Magars with their own very unique culture, live in poverty stricken condition. The Kham Magars have a long tradition of shamanism. Later, when Hinduism made its way into the hills of Nepal, they accepted it but kept many of their own traditions intact. But the Nepali state often tried to suppress their distinctive culture.

The Maoists started their 'People's War' in the areas in which Kham Magars predominate – the so called 'Kham Magar country'. Analysts have given several reasons in which the Maoists chose this particular site, but they

agree that one of the reasons is for the presence of the Kham Magars themselves (de Sales, 2004) . The Kham Magars had a unique culture which endeared them to the Maoists. The highest point in Rolpa district in which Kham Magars predominate, Jaljaja, was important for them for religious reasons. They used to go up to the top of the mountain and sacrifice animals to propitiate their local God. Although the Maoists banned the practice of animal sacrifice, they paid respect to the mountain by erecting a pillar on it that bore the names of their fallen comrades. The Maoists also used another important local mountain, Sisne as symbol of their cause. In fact they combined the names of the two mountains to denote their first campaign in 1995 – the Si—Ja campaign.

Thus, by appropriating cultural symbols of backward and marginal peoples, the Maoists attempted to deepen their links with them. Yet, the Maoists never believed that this was to be their end goal. Their ultimate goal was always about creating a caste-free society. Yet they believed that in order to achieve that, they had to first improve the lot of the culturally marginalized.

**The Maoist experience with ethnicity in East and West Nepal compared:**The Kham Magars among whom the Maoists based the initial phase of their war against the state had little experience of opposing the state on ethnic terms. In fact, one researcher claims that 'identity politics' was 'unknown' in the 1980s (de Sales, 2004). Yet they had a strong cultural tradition, and were conscious of themselves as being Kham Magars. They had also seen their culture being attacked by members of the dominant castes.

The Maoists were able to use the Kham Magar's culture to their advantage. Their appropriation of the mountains Jaljala and Sisne, sacred to the Kham, into their own narrative is proof of that. When the Maoists said 'Glory to Sisne' or 'Glory to Jaljala' they were both solidifying their ties with the local Kham but also using them as a potent rallying cry. For the same article in which the phrase 'Glory to Jaljala' appears, there is also present the sentence 'Rolpa (the district where Jaljala is located) is immortal….source of revolution, the center of hope'.

By combining their own mythology with theirs, the Maoists thus achieved a deep link with the Kham Magars. However, their links with the Kirantis of eastern Nepal were much shallower. Indeed, interviews conducted by the International Crisis Group in 2011 revealed that most people there had little or no interest in Marxism and that it was their identity, and especially the defense of their 'language, culture and religion' that they were concerned with (International Crisis Group, 2011).

**How well can the Maoists capture the ethnic vote?** By Chandra's criterion, the UCPN (M) is certainly not an ethnic party. The Maoist insurgency was 'basically a class war fuelled by poverty' (Subba, 2006). Although the Maoists have abandoned violence, their aims have not diverged significantly.

Why have the Maoists then chosen to support ethnic movements? Subba argues that it is because poverty 'is highly correlated with' a 'low social and ethnic status'. It is true that hill ethnic groups, on an overall basis, fare poorly with respect to Brahmins and Chhetris. Hill ethnic groups are not only poorer and less educated than Brahmins, but there is a very large gap in between them in governmental and administrative posts. Gurung (Gurung, 2003) found that the composition of governance elites had changed little in the course of a hundred years. While hill ethnics occupied only 2.8 percent of elite government posts in 1854, they occupied 8.4 percent of such posts in 1999; hardly a great improvement.

Thus, hill ethnics face at least two barriers to their development. They are relatively poorer off, and they are much less represented in government institutions. Thus, they would be more likely to support a party that not only promised to increase their economic status, but one that also pledged to increase their participation of their own affairs. The UCPN (M) had promised to give the ethnic groups greater autonomy, and also to support and preserve their languages and culture. In particular, the UCPN (M) had supported the idea of ethnic federalism. Although not the first party in the country to espouse the cause of ethnic federalism, it made this issue central to its political agenda (Kathmandu Post, 2013).

During the 2008 Constituent Assembly Elections, the Maoists were able to garner 50 percent of the First Past the Post seats. Their candidates, as expected, won in their Kham Magar heartland. However, they also won in many hill districts of Eastern Nepal. However, while they won many seats in the Khambu areas, they did not even win a single seat in hill Limbu areas. How can this discrepancy be explained? One explanation is that as the Maoists never really had a deep presence in *either* Limbu or Khambu areas, they relied on local leaders for their support in both those areas.

The Maoists did rely on Gopal Khambu and other Khambu (Rai) activists to set up their base of support in the Khambu areas. They also relied on Khambu leaders to help them set up support in Limbu areas (International Crisis Group, 2011). Their lack of success in Limbu areas suggests that they did not get the level of support that they desired.

Their support for ethnic federalism may be an attempt to further deepen their hold in the Khambu areas, and to win at least a few seats in the Limbu areas. The results of the forthcoming 2013 elections will reveal how well their strategy has worked in practice.

**INDIA**

Identity has been central to the electoral aims several large parties in India. Furthermore political parties in India have been able to take advantage of several features present in the Indian political system that are not yet present in Nepal. These are policies regarding language, affirmative action and the creation of new federal units (Chandra, 2005). These are constitutionally sanctioned policies that enable an individual to have access to the state and its considerable resources. Despite the advent of privatization, the Indian state's role in the economy is manifestly huge – as of 2005, it still controlled 69 percent of all jobs in the organized economy (Chandra, 2005).

With so much at stake, parties have a clear motivation to mobilize in an ethnic direction if that can enable them to have greater access to the state's resources. Given the preference by the Indian constitution to linguistic and caste concerns, ethnic parties that emphasize these concerns should find it relatively easy to attain a modicum of electoral success (Bayly, 1999).

Three ethnic parties will be considered here: the Dravida Munnetra Kazigham (DMK) – which initially fought for secession from the Indian state and later developed a distinct anti-Brahmin identity, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which is mobilized primarily along the lines of caste, and the Shiv Sena, which has most successfully used language and 'nationality' as its rallying card. All of these three parties have tasted electoral success in large and heterogeneous Indian states. All these three parties are 'ethnic' in Chandra's sense. Thus their evolution dynamics can be compared with that of ethnic parties in Nepal to test in what direction they are moving.

**Maharasthra – the Shiv Sena's Attempts to Use Linguistic and Religious Polarization:**Formed in 1966, as a 'volunteer organization' that aimed to better conditions for 'native' Maharashtrians, the Shiv Sena became transformed into a political party as a result of the mass appeal that it was soon able to generate among those same Maharashtrians, many of whom felt 'systematically excluded from gainful participation' in the city (Joshi, 1970).

In understanding the appeal of ethnic politics in India, it is incumbent to analyze the Shiv Sena for a very important reason -- how could a party can mobilize ethnic sentiment in a modern, multicultural milieu such as the city of Mumbai?

The Shiv Sena is far more of an urban phenomenon than is either the DMK or the BSP, the other two Indian parties considered in this paper. In its early days, it performed 'miserably' in cities outside Mumbai, to which its appeal was 'virtually limited' (Joshi, 1970). Lately, it has not fared much better in regions outside Mumbai. The Shiv Sena, in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the 1995 Legislative Elections in Maharashtra but has since then never won anything other than the Mumbai municipal elections.

In the past, it has tried to change its platform. From being exclusively focused on Maharashtrian grievances, it tried to project itself as a defender of Hindu interests throughout the country, chiefly at the expense of Indian Muslims. It was that factor that led to its rise in popularity among the larger public in Maharashtra (Katzenstein, Mehta and Thakkar, 2002).

If the results of statewide elections for all years up to the present time are considered, it can be seen that the Shiv Sena has never garnered more than 20 percent of the statewide vote That fact, and the fact that in the last legislative elections it obtained only 16 percent of all votes cast should give us a clearer idea of the limits of its appeal. However, the results of the last 3 elections reveal that politics in the state appear to have 'stabilized' around four major parties, neither of which is much smaller than the other. The Congress has seen its popularity erode further, so that it is now barely larger than the other three parties.

Thus, it may be that politics in Maharashtra has reached a state of 'equilibrium', at least for the time being. The Shiv Sena, having realized its own limits, appears thus to be consolidating its own position. The other parties appear to be doing the same. On the other hand, the fact that its share of the vote has leveled off suggests that the voters who made their minds up about it are content to vote in its favor.

During the last three elections, the four big parties appear to have chosen well the seats they contested; garnering a vote count, on average, well over 30 percent. This is another indication of how politics appears to be 'stabilizing' – as political parties favor constituencies that they know they have a greater chance of winning.

This offers empirical evidence that the ethnic platform may always be a limited one. If the other two Indian parties, the DMK and the BSP are also considered, a similar conclusion can be drawn.

**Tamil Nadu: The DMK's Agenda:** The Dravida Munnetra Kazhigham was formed in 1949 and became involved in secessionism until 1962 when it dropped the demand completely. Today, the party and its offshoots have established a 'stranglehold' over the politics of Tamil Nadu (Rajagopalan, 2006). The DMK sees itself as a defender of Tamil culture, especially its language. For example, when it came to power in Tamil Nadu in 1996, it made it mandatory for all shop signs to be in Tamil.

Linguistic chauvinism is one of the two pillars of identity that the DMK has used. The other is caste polarization. The DMK were heirs to the 'anti-Brahman' Madras Justice Party (Bayly, 1999) and early on made a decision to 'destroy caste'. Yet, they preferred to make one particular caste, Brahmins, irrelevant and mostly focused their energy in this regard. In a larger sense, their twin missions of promoting Dravidian culture and ending Brahmin supremacy were driven by a common goal of eradicating North Indian influence from Tamil Nadu because they associated Brahmins as alien Aryans who had imposed themselves on Tamil (Dravidian) society.

Caste calculations have long been important for the DMK. The Vanniars, a community that is quite numerous in northern Tamil Nadu and forms about 12 percent of the total state population was responsible for the DMK's winning a majority in the Tamil Nadu Assembly in 1967. However, the conflict between the DMK and Vanniyars has been held responsible as one of the main factors leading to its rout in the Assembly elections of 1991(Suresh, 1992). The Vanniars' primary demand in the 1980s had been for 20 percent reservations in state services and education and 2 percent in the center. In 1989 the Vanniyar leader Ramadass formed the PMK. This party participated in Assembly elections in 1991 and 1996, and did reasonably well, winning one and four seats respectively. Yet, it proved unable to leave behind its parochial origins and persisted as a caste-based party, drawing in primarily only Vanniyars.

The DMK's attitude towards Dalits though is more complex as it often appeared unwilling to confront sharp caste divisions. That attitude may be traced to the founder of the Dravidian movement, EVS Ramaswamy 'Periyar' himself. Periyar had polarized Tamil society between Brahmins and 'the rest'; he saw little reason to foment divisions within 'the rest'. The DMK leaders appeared to adhering to a similar logic. The DMK effectively mobilized caste Hindus and claimed that it served the interest of the backward castes.

The Backward Caste – Dalit fault line has been well exposed by the recent conduct of the PMK (Paakali Mataal Katchi or Toiler's Party). Led by the Vanniyar leader Ramadoss, it has fared reasonably well in its northern Tamil Nadu heartland but has little support elsewhere. In recent years, it has also begun to lose the support of the Vanniyars. Thus, in the view of many Tamil observers, it has begun to play the 'anti-Dalit card', such as by attacking 'inter-caste marriages' involving Dalit men and women of other communities. Ramadoss has also called for amendment to a National Act that tried to prevent atrocities against Dalits, arguing that such an Act had been 'misused'.

The Vanniyars' were the traditional oppressors of the Dalits in north Tamil Nadu and during their agitation in the 1980s, although the movement was directed against the government, Dalits became the main victims ("Sectarian Poison", 2013).

The Vanniyars made their demands for reservations when Tamil Nadu was led by MGR Ramachandran's AIADMK. The AIADMK had refused earlier to negotiate but the human and economic costs had made it rethink. However, the DMK, which came into power in 1989, moved to accommodate the demands. Although it did not specifically address the Vanniyars' demand when it released its new reservation scheme, it was clear that that community was to get the largest share of the benefits. Furthermore, the scheme offered Vanniyars something close to their original demands ("Sectarian Poison", 2013).

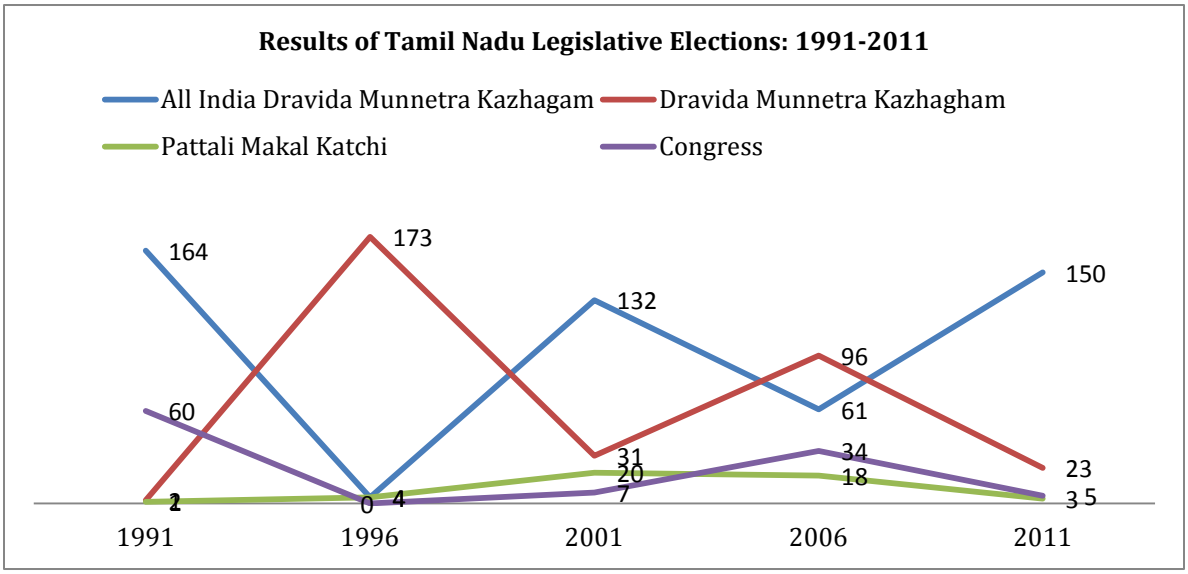
**Uttar Pradesh: Has The Once Ascendant Bahujansamaj Party Reached A Plateau?** Formed in 1984 by Kanshi Ram, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was created to fight for the downtrodden by capturing the 'master key' of political power(BSP website). In this, it has been very successful. Kanshi Ram's protégé, the female Dalit leader Mayawati, has been Chief Minister of

Uttar Pradesh, the country's largest province, four times. The last time she became Chief Minister, in 2007, she formed a government with an absolute majority, winning 206 seats out of a total of 403("Election Commission of India", 2007).

The BSP's rise to power was facilitated by two major factors: the evaporation of Congress support in the state and the assertiveness of caste or community based appeals. Under Congress rule, caste or community assertiveness had been much muted, because the party had disapproved of overt appeals by its own members (Hasan, 2002).

With the Congress being marginalized in Uttar Pradesh (henceforth, UP), parties like the BSP and the Samajwadi Party (SP) entered the mainstream and began to emerge victorious. The two parties, the SP and the BSP, both vie for the votes of marginal people but they have different axes of support. The BSP gets moves of its votes from the dispersed Dalit population in UP, even though it was originally formed with the aim of attracting all subaltern elements of society (Hasan, 2002). The SP, on the other hand, draws its share of the vote largely from the subset of the population identified as Other Backward Castes (henceforth, OBCs) and Muslims ("About Samajwadi Party," n.d).

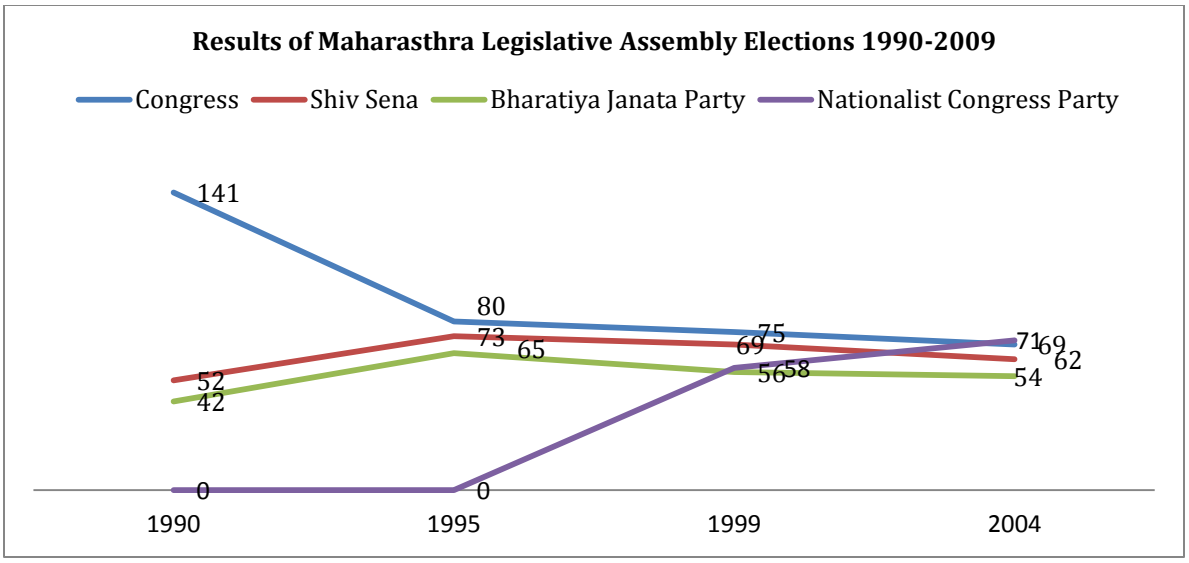
UP politics today is largely the domain of 'backward' segments of society, and the BSP-SP rivalry reflects that. If the number of seats obtained by the two parties is aggregated (for the years 2007 and 2012) and then averaged, it comes out to 303.5. That is, in the last two Legislative Assembly elections in UP, non BSP/SP parties could on average, manage to win only about 100 seats out of 403.As argued by Arend Lijphart, the FPTP or 'winner take all' system is unsuitable in sharply divided societies (Lijphart, 1999). UP appears to be an example of a place that is growing more sharply divided, with the sharpest divisions occurring at the bottom of the social pyramid. In 2007, the BSP was the largest party but it had only a 5 percentage lead (in total votes) over the second largest party, the SP. In 2012, the SP's lead over the second largest party, the BSP was only a smidgen over 3 percent of the total vote.



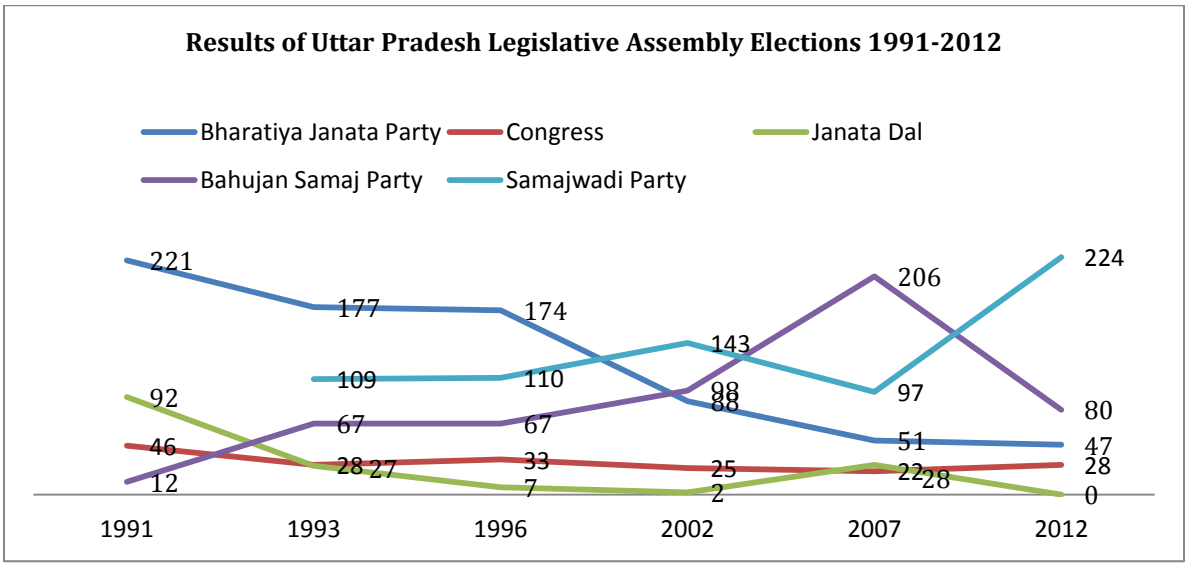

Source: *Statistical Report on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu, 1991-2011*, Election Commission of India, New Delhi, India.

The threat of voter rejection (such as presumably what the BSP suffered in 2012) might act as a strong deterrent in case a party decides to undertake policies that favor its own community or base. Still, if a party has a strong majority, then five years is a long time and it might just decide to implement policies without concerning itself too much about the future. The consequences of undertaking such policies could be to polarize communities further. The opposition then might have a strong desire to exact 'revenge' and thus enact similarly polarizing policies. This could set in motion a vicious cycle that could be difficult to correct.

The evidence from UP suggests that 'caste wars' have solidified, and now they are no more only fought in the 'high caste versus low caste' plane – although the BSP is still ready to blame the 'Manuwadis' for the oppression of their lot. Yet, the fact that the BSP was willing to cohabit the political space with the 'high caste' BJP and




Source: *Statistical Report on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Maharashtra, 1990-2009*. Election Commission of India, New Delhi, India.




Source: *Statistical Report on General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh, 1991-2012.* Election Commission of India, New Delhi, India.

is willing to field large numbers of 'high caste' candidates, as it did in 2007 (Bidwai, 2007) and again in 2012 (Srivastava, 2012) suggests it is open to any method that could win it votes. It has even courted the OBC and Muslim communities, long seen as the base of its rival, the SP. In the 2012 Legislative Assembly elections, for instance, OBCs were given 113 tickets, Muslims 85 and Dalits 88 (Srivastava, 2012).

In its distribution of party tickets, the BSP appears to be have behaved fairly 'democratically', giving them to members from across the social spectrum. Its loss in 2012 has been attributed to its inability to confront corruption and crime and to a strong anti-incumbency factor (Agrawal, 2012). A more detailed analysis concludes that the BSP largely kept its 'vote bank' or base intact and that the changes occurred at the margins, primarily with the Muslims, who had voted in 2007 for the BSP but decided not to vote for them this time around (Tripathi, 2012).

**CONCLUSION**

In the three Indian states concerned, politics has appeared to reach some sort of equilibrium. In UP, the Yadav led SP and the Dalit led BSP are the largest parties and chief rivals. It is true that the SP was routed

in 2007 and the BSP in 2012 in the Assembly Elections and yet a closer inspection reveals that their margin of victory was quite small and the results more the result of a 'winner take all' FPTP electoral system. In Maharashtra too, there does not appear to be much more scope for ethnic parties to progress; here, unlike UP, region and language, rather than caste are the dominant ethnic issues and these naturally have less appeal. Hence this might help explain why ethnic politics is not as widespread. Because the Constitution guarantees many more distribution benefits on the basis of caste than language or indigenous origin, there are relatively fewer incentives to sustain ethnic politics. The Shiv Sena has been winning the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation elections regularly – control of this body, the richest municipal organization in South Asia, offers direct benefits to the Shiv Sena's Marathi base. In Tamil Nadu, ethnic politicization has taken another turn. Early on, ethnic parties focused their ire on displacing a small minority (Brahmins) from positions of governmental power while uniting everybody else under the Dravidian banner. The two largest parties in the state today, the DMK and the AIA-DMK are both legacies of the earlier anti-Brahmin/pro-Dravidian movement. Now, with the Brahmins' earlier hold on politics completely weakened, the Dravidian parties cannot play the 'us versus them' card. On the other hand, because they had earlier identified all non-Brahmin people in the state as 'oppressed' and deserving of economic aid, they are forced to resorting to large scale populism. This is why the 'reservations' policy of Tamil Nadu (and other South Indian states like Karnataka) must constantly accommodate growing group demands. Thus, while the politics of Tamil Nadu appears to have reached equilibrium, it appears to be a fragile one. In fact the two main parties share essentially the same ideology and do not distinguish themselves by appealing to particular groups. This makes them susceptible to blackmail, as happened in the Vanniyar case.

In Nepal, ethnic politics has taken a different turn. In the 2008 Constituent Assembly Elections, ethnic parties in a strict sense were able to win many seats only in the southern Terai plains. However, the Maoist party, which claimed to support ethnic aspirations, won several seats in those *hill* areas of Nepal in which ethnicity had become a major issue. In this respect, the hills themselves can be divided into two areas – the western hills, in which ethnicity and identity had historically not been given much importance, and the eastern hills, in which, historically they had been. In the western hills, by fusing local, marginal cultural practices with their own ideology, the Maoists had managed to strike a deep chord with the public there. In the east, where the level of ethnic consciousness was already high, the Maoists won support only after co-opting local activists into their fold. This was not always done smoothly, for the relation between the Maoists and the local activists was not always amicable.

The small size of Nepal's hill ethnics, combined with the modest resources at their disposal, may make it impractical for every such group to be represented politically by its own party. Rather, it might be easier for ethnic groups to combine their forces to launch a broader based ethnic front. That has just begun to happen in Nepal. Such a situation would be analogous to that in Indian states if, in a political sense, castes are taken to be similar to 'ethnic groups'. The large ethnic parties in India, such as the BSP and the DMK do not serve a single ethnic group. 'Dalit' is not a single, indivisible category. There are many Dalit castes in Uttar Pradesh that have banded together to fight for a common cause. Similarly, the DMK and the AIADMK are both supported by a collection of ethnic groups whose common goal was to remove the dominance of Brahmins in Tamil Nadu's politics.

It is too early to tell whether such a truly ethnic party will find success in Nepal's hills, whether they will continue to support the Maoists, or whether ethnic issues will fade away as other pressing concerns come to the fore. The latter is unlikely to happen, however, given the sense of injustice felt by the hill ethnic groups and their determination to strive for change.

*Note: Neither the Maoists nor the hill ethnic parties fared well in the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections. This has led some commentators to argue that ethnicity as an issue is no longer salient in the Nepali context. For example, in an editorial in the Nepali Times, (29 November to 5 December 2013) it was written that the result of the election was 'an unequivocal rejection of the politics of ethnicity'. However, the result of a single election cannot be used to determine a trend. Hill ethnic voters may not have thought of ethnic issues as urgent but they may still regard them as important. If the underlying issues that concern ethnic voters are not addressed, ethnic politics could still make a comeback.*

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