

GEOGRAPHY AND ELECTORAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT : A recent note on the nature of relationship between the geography of elections and political geography attempted to find a suitable place for the former in the mainstream of modern political geographical thought (Dikshit, 1980). It focused attention on the vital link that is somewhat blurred at this stage and needed to be clarified. It was an important step in this direction. The note mainly placed electoral studies in the context of contemporary view of human geography as a study of ' who gets what where ' in the radical or relevance theme, which has its ideological underpinnings, and the related view of political geography as the study of spatial aspects of power politics and conflict resolution. Since it was a preliminary probe, the theme needs further discussion and elaboration, as electoral studies attract a growing number of geographers, and it is very pertinent to India which is the largest democracy in the world. The discussion can be opened up with a re-statement of the more widely accepted paradigm of geography today and then place political geography and electoral studies in it.

The first signs of a major break from the areal differentiation view in geography, and its ideographic methodology, appeared in the mid-1960s with the redefining of geography in the general system framework (Ackerman, 1963). Following this, the overriding problem of geography came to be the full understanding of the vast system comprising man and the natural environment. According to this view, geography treats the man-environment system primarily from the point of view of space in time. It seeks to explain how the subsystems of the physical environment are organized on the earth's surface and how man distributes himself over the earth in his space relation to physical features and to other men (Ad-Hoc Committee on Geography, 1965). Geography's organizing concept in short became spatial distributions and space relations on the earth's surface of the vast overriding system comprised by man and

the natural environment. Within this framework, the correlations of spatial distributions, considered both statically and dynamically, are considered to be the most ready keys to understanding existing or developing life system, social systems, or environmental changes.

The system approach offered the flexibility of studying the interacting, interdependent parts of the different sub-systems of the vast man-environment system at various levels. The study of human systems, like cultural, social, political, economic, implied interaction among themselves, as well with the other sub-systems of the environment, producing spatial patterns at a given time. The study of such spatial patterns in a temporal framework is termed as spatial processes (Abler, Adams and Gould, 1971). Spatial patterns and processes thus became a shorthand for the study of the man-environment system on earth's surface.

Political geography was also redefined by the Ad-Hoc Committee on Geography, under the Chairmanship of Ackerman, to be concerned with the interaction of geographical area and political process. The emphasis was on the spatial distribution and space relations of political process, with attention centering on the parts of the earth occupied by a given political system, sub-system, or systems. It recognized two general characteristics of a political system: the political process by or with which it functions, and the territory to which it is bound. Every political process has a geographical area uniquely associated with it and no geographical area escapes some relation with a political process. Thus political geography was taken to be a study of the spatial distribution and space relations of political processes. Political processes were defined as the succession of actions or operations which man conducts to establish or to maintain a political system. Most of these processes operate through political institutions.

This paradigm of political geography not only integrated the sub-field of study into the main discipline but also opened up possibilities of interdisciplinary communication with other social sciences like political science, sociology, anthropology and economics, enabling the exchange of concepts, tools and techniques with them. It also enabled to complement the empirical-inductive method of thought and investigation widely adopted during the adherence of the sub-field to the areal differentiation view with the theoretical deductive approach leading to attempts in model building, hypothesis testing and theory constructions. Subsequently, a methodology to a systems approach to political geographical studies was presented by Cohen and Rosenthal (1971), and Soja (1974) building upon the four traditional approaches of Whittlesey's emphasis on the law-landscape inpress, Hartshorne's linking of functionalism to geographical space, Gottmann's recognition

of the disconformity between political area and Stephen Jone's attempt to develop a 'unified field' theory for linking political ideas and political area.

By the early 1970s electoral geography was one of the most rapidly developing branches of geography and made significant contributions to the study of political behaviour in the spatial context. There was however, a great diversity in the conceptual and technical approaches adopted in these studies. There were the behaviourists who stressed upon the fact that the spatial locations and patterns seen on the map are the end result of a mass of individual decisions and actions. The decisions in turn are made by individuals only after a process of evaluation of the available information about the outside world. Such studies laid strong emphasis on the study of information flow and the different stages of decision-making. This process-oriented approach was largely developed by Cox (1968, 1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1971, 1972), Johnston (1972, 1973, 1974, 1976) and Reynolds (1969, 1974), dealing with the studies of neighbourhood effect, friends and neighbours effect and relocation effects in voting responses of individuals. There were still others who adopted traditional approaches like the areal-structural approach and areal-ecological approach. The former examines the spatial pattern and structure of voting choice as revealed by the election results (Prescott, 1959, 1969; Lewis 1965; Taylor, 1973 Busteed, 1970, 1974); while the latter views election results in relation to the socio-economic and demographic features of the constituencies in which they occur (Brunn and Hoffmann, 1970; Roberts and Rummage 1965; Cox 1968; McPhail 1971, Busteed 1975). Yet there was no serious effort to clarify the relationship between electoral studies and political geography. Even recent books entitled such as Political, Electoral and Spatial Systems (Johnston, 1979); Seats, Votes and the Spatial Organisation of Elections (Gudgin and Taylor, 1979); and

Geography of Elections (Taylor and Joenston, 1979); ignored to link electoral studies with the subfield of geography within which they were being carried out.

Before we turn our attention to establish the link between electoral studies and political geography, and attempt to place it within the current mainstream of geography it may be helpful to define certain important concepts like politics, political process, political system, and interaction of territory with political process. It would then become easy to establish proper linkages of electoral geography with political geography and the main discipline.

Politics has been defined differently at different times. A recent definition puts it simply as "the making of decision by public means in contrast to the making of personal decisions privately by individuals" (Deutsch, 1970). Any community larger than the family contains an element of politics. It could be a labour union a group of business investors, real-estate speculators, a political party or a government. Because politics is the making of decisions by public means, the government, which has a monopoly over the legitimate force, is the largest and strongest of all the groups. There be interest groups, however which may influence the government into taking decisions that may serve their interests. Politics, therefore, occurs mostly in the pursuit of interests of particular individuals of groups. The concept of interest implies a claim of expectation of reward. Politics deals with the interplay of interests the claiming and distribution of rewards or values. Different individuals and groups, or even countries, acting in politics and pursuing their interests may co. operate or compete in regard to the allocation of values. Indeed, politics has been often defined, as David Easton (1954) does, as the process by which the "the authoritative allocation of values" takes place.

Deutsch (1970) defines values as things or relationships which people would like to have or to enjoy. Lasswell (1936, 1950)

suggests that there exist at least eight basic values which people pursue either in politics or life, power, deference (or respect, recitude (which involves both righteousness and justice), wealth, well-being (or health), enlightenment, skill and affection. People want to be powerful as power is considered to be an instrument by which all other values are obtained. For many people power is also a value in itself. Since power functions both as means and end, it is a key value in politics. Respect, and with it, status, prestige and authority, is a value which is perhaps even more sought after than power. Relations between races, among cultural ethnic or religious groups, between magement and labour, [and among nations in the world, all involve the allocation of respect. The more respected a group is, the better off it is likely to be. Wealth, which Deutsch defines as, the total supply of goods, services, and facilities and resources for production, is a decisive variable for the range of options before a society. Wealth, to a certain extent, can buy some of the other values like health, well-being and enlightenment. People need affection. They also want to feel righteous in terms of their own conscience and also in terms of their religion or philosophy or the system of right and wrong that prevails in their society.

Two more values are added by Deutsch to this list of eight substantive values to enjoy the later. They are security and liberty. Ever since the rise of the state, people have used political organization to protect social arrangements, persons and property. It is still considered the basic function of the government. But it is also charged with safeguarding the conditions necessary for the continued functioning of the delicate technological and economic structures today, which provide mankind's security, health and essential supplies of food and energy. Liberty may mean many different things to different people. But it essentially involves the opportunity for the many sided

cumulative growth.

Clearly politics determines much of the allocation of values just mentioned. It determines what values are allocated to who when and how. Political geography considers an additional aspect, where, that is what values are allocated to who, where, when and how. In one way it takes over from political science where the latter leaves. It takes into account the political process in its organisation in terrestrial space. Each interest group within a territory organises itself into an organization, with its offices and branches at particular locations, to serve the interests of its members who live at different locations. The bargaining of different interest groups is the basis of political process (Deutsch, 1970). If many interest groups move into politics to serve the interests of their respective members they may use their activities to paralyze and checkmate one another so that the outcome does not significantly change, or else they may succeed in co-ordinating their activities so that what one group does reinforces the activities of another group. Whereas such actions may transform the structure of the political system, it may also bring about spatial changes or may even change the spatial structure of the political system.

The political system, as Jackson and Samuels (1971) put it, "represents that pattern of human interaction wherein power and authority are generated, allocated, influenced, and changed - the pattern whereby society is organized, whether that organization is formal or informal." The political system, is a collection of recognizable units, which are characterized by cohesion and covariance. The units of a political system may comprise of the structures based on law, like parliaments, executives, bureaucracies, and courts, or just the associational or formally organized units, like political parties, interest groups, and the media of communication, and undifferentiated structures like kinship and lineage, status

and caste groups. Cohesion means sticking together or forming a whole and covariance means changing together, that is, if one unit changes, the other does too. Where the units are interdependent, they may be called as components or parts of the system. A collection of units will not be called a system. Only after interdependence and transactions among different units does it become a system.

The approach to study political geography as defined here need not concern only with the state and its particular forms of institutions. With this the political system can be identified at "different levels of inclusiveness, from the parliamentary system to voluntary organization, to a municipality, province, state, national unit and various kinds of international units" (Easton, 1965). In this context, the study of a political party such as the Congress system by Rajni Kothari (1964), a panchayat, a labour organization, or the urban political structures would be legitimate subjects for political structures and for political geography, if the spatial organization of these elements of the political system is studied. The different levels of inclusiveness of political system admit different sources of power and authority as well as their areal organisation. But the largest and most powerful is the government with its various institutions.

In democratic systems access to government machinery, which is the sole repository of power with which it can make decisions authoritatively regarding the allocation of values to various interest groups in the society, is made possible by the mechanism of elections. The people are the ultimate source of power, who legitimise and allocate it to political parties whom they perceive to serve their interest best. Their aggregation in constituencies encloses their perceptions of their interests within these de jure territorial units, as well as in their total environment. It is this vital subset of the political system in its entire territorial framework that electoral geography studies.

The mechanism of elections serve other purposes also indirectly. At the time of the election a political system is brought into sharp focus, which provide insights into the basic nature and actual functioning of the system as a whole. Elections are also major agencies of political socialization and political participation, which open up channels between the polity and the society, between the elites and the masses, and between the individual and his government (Palmer, 1995). The spatial spread of political socialization and political participation is a genuine field of enquiry for political geography, which can best be understood at the time of an election.

The different approaches to electoral geography, behavioural, areal structural and areal ecological are not at cross purposes to each other. They only represent the differences of scale at which electoral studies are undertaken. Elections can be studied from the point of view of both micro-and macro-political analysis. At the micro-level the voter is the object of study, where his voting decision is taken in response to the existing structures and the environmental forces operating at the level of his immediate locality. He is the node in a big network of communication through which transactions of various kinds take place which ultimately condition his voting response. This approach puts the individual in his total milieu. The understanding of voting patterns at higher scales, such as at the booth level, assembly and parliamentary constituency levels, in the case of India, requires the aggregation of responses of large number of individuals within their aggregated milieu at those levels. The higher level studies may suggest certain hypotheses which may best be verified at the micro-level only. However, the analysis of the total milieu of the electorate at macro-level system within its spatial context. Implied in electoral studies are the interactions among population, territory and the political-electoral systems. Territory does not mean the spatial extent

of the sovereign state alone, but it also contains within it the physical and biotic system and resources, which further on lead to the distribution of population, settlement and transportation networks, and the total spatial organization. In this manner, the understanding of electoral patterns at constituency level requires the understanding of its entire geography, as defined by the Ad-Hoc Committee, as a whole, and in this manner they become an essential part of the main discipline. Electoral studies are therefore not merely the study of political attitudes and preferences of different segments of society with their spatial variations, but an understanding of the entire political system within its total geographical framework at a given point in time. The differences in political attitudes may in fact reflect the variations of the man-environment system over the earth's surface. To illustrate this point further, it was observed during the study of two recent parliamentary elections in India, that hill regions of Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu region showed consistently different patterns of electoral participation and party preferences than the adjoining plains of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. These differences resulted due to differences of terrain, social cleavages, levels of development, channels of communication and the period of familiarity with politics (Singh, 1977, 1980). Similar differences could be seen between the Konkan and Malabar coastal regions. This is what has possibly led Taylor and Johnston (1979) to remark that electoral patterns reflect and help produce the overall human geography of a region or state.

Seen in this light, electoral studies become an integral part of not only political geography but also of the larger discipline, whose anthropocentric view within a systems framework enables viewing it from any angle to see it in its totality. The complementarity of the empirical-inductive with theoretical

ductive in traditional and behaviouralist approaches, and the application of quantitative techniques to studies both at micro and macro levels, open up possibilities of a highly rewarding field of geography. It justifies the existence of electoral geography,

as Cox (1969) had also remarked earlier, as a discipline independent of comparative studies in political science, while maintaining it within the mainstream of current philosophy and methodology of the main discipline of geography.

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