

The Road Ahead

Can Regional Identity and National Unity Coexist?

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Much of our political debates and discussions are centered around national politics. We often forget that national politics and decisions made by the Union government have very little relevance to the lives of most people most of the time. Our democracy revolves around the states. States are the units of politics, and the national political outcome is largely an arithmetic aggregate of the verdicts in states. Strong and popular leaders at the national level sometimes influence some voters – usually about 4-5% - to vote differently at the national level. But rarely do we see a radically different electoral behavior in national elections vis-a-vis state legislative elections.

That is why we should closely look at the long-term political developments in states in order to understand the trajectory of the Union, and to prepare better for the future as a nation. Even more significantly, some times regional leaders whose political arena of action is limited to a state may make larger contribution to India's political evolution than the so called "national" leaders of major parties.

N.T.Ramarao, whose birth centenary Telugu people celebrated on May 28 last week, is a great example of a regional party leader whose impact transcended his local power base, or duration of his political career.

As a leader representing Telugu people, he gave identity and recognition to his language, culture and society. Until NTR's emergence as a political force, all Southern states were clubbed as 'Madrasis'! Beyond the culture, identity and recognition, NTR played a pivotal role in transforming the nature of politics in the country.

The first generation leaders of Independent India did a credible, indeed an impressive, job building the foundations, institutions and practices of a fledgling democracy. True, state monopolies were created and economic freedom and choice were restricted because of romantic notions of state control and Soviet model of economic planning. The resultant license-permit-control raj severely crippled the economy. Even more damaging, a culture of ubiquitous corruption and lust for power became endemic because of state's oppressive and domineering role determining production and distribution of goods and services. But that fascination for half-baked socialism and state control apart, there was a deep commitment to public service until the early 70's, and the ideals of freedom struggle were still a major influence in democratic politics.

But the extraordinary centralisation of 1970's, the cynical practice of power as an end itself, and the evermore regressive taxation, and industrial and trade policies led to serious erosion of democratic values and ethics in politics. The imposition of Emergency in June 1975 marked the nadir of our democracy, further centralizing our polity and economy. The dramatic rejection of Congress monopoly and authoritarianism in the 1977 Lok Sabha election opened up a great opportunity for India to engineer genuine democratic reform and promote competition and choice in economic

management. But Janata Party lacked both cohesion and imagination to transform India. As a result, Janata's victory, while restoring freedoms, has only signified a change of players without altering the rules of the game.

Not surprisingly, Mrs Gandhi came back to power, and Congress monopoly of power continued unchallenged except in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. That is the context in which NTR captured the imagination of the Telugu people and stormed to power in a spectacular fashion just within nine months of entering public life.

NTR's contribution to AP public life was significant. But his contribution to transformation of national politics is even more significant, and perhaps more enduring. Three achievements stand out. First, at a time when Congress monopoly in most states seemed unalterable, NTR demonstrated conclusively that non-congress alternatives could be viable, effective and popular in states. State after state broke congress monopoly following similar models. Second, NTR led the moment for strengthening federalism. In a society in which most people have no clue about federalism, NTR united like-minded leaders like Ramakrishna Hegde, Karunanidhi, Biju Patnaik and Jyoti Basu, and mobilized public opinion in favour of states' legitimate constitutional role and powers. While a variety of factors led to strengthening of federalism, the leadership of the then opposition chief ministers led by NTR was a crucial factor. Finally, NTR accelerated the creation of a national political alternative through his tireless efforts and leadership. In the 1984-85 Lok Sabha election, in the wake of Mrs Gandhi's cruel assassination, Congress swept the polls everywhere, and BJP was

reduced to two seats in Lok Sabha (one of them was won with NTR's support in AP). NTR and his party, winning 35 seats in AP, bucked the trend, and acted as the de facto opposition in parliament.

NTR's political achievements demonstrate that regional aspirations and identity and true nationalism are not mutually exclusive; indeed they can be complementary. In strong federal polities, it is success of leaders in states that catapults them into office at federal level.

Our democracy is vibrant. We need to decentralize and encourage emergence of many voices and ideas to get the best out of our governance process. In particular, we need strong, effective and accountable local governments if we are to harness the energy and talent of the younger generation. That will allow our people to discover the link between their vote and the consequences directly affecting them and their families. Only decentralisation will establish the link between taxes and services, and make people look at the long-term benefits instead of seeking short-term maximization.

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