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Farewell to Maratha Politics?

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Assembly Election in Maharashtra

The defeat of a sitting government need not draw much attention. But when it happens in a state that does not often see a change in the party/coalition heading the government, it stirs much expectation and speculation. More so, when the change could be a catalyst for regime change. The assembly election in Maharashtra in October 2014 may have been crucial in this sense.

Politics in Maharashtra has long been known for the twin features of a dominant party and a dominant caste. Even when the Congress faced setbacks nationally, Maharashtra mostly withstood the all-India trends. In 1967, the Congress in was not disturbed in the state by the upheaval in north India. In 1977, it went through a crisis, but was not uprooted as it was in most of the states of the north. In 1989 too, Maharashtra did not turn anti-Congress. Thus, shocks to the dominance of the Congress were either absorbed or became moderate when they reached Maharashtra. In the period of post-Congress politics, Maharashtra is one state where the Congress has been in power for three terms. It lost out in 1995 but came back to power in 1999, in spite of a split and an alliance with the faction that had split from it.

Part of the reason why the Congress survived in Maharashtra was its long association with the dominant Maratha caste. Like the Congress, Maratha dominance also survived amid many challenges and periodic upsets. The first major challenge emerged from competition among the Maratha elite. This was in 1977-78 when Maratha leaders were ostensibly divided over Indira Gandhi's leadership and whether to collaborate with Indira loyalists in the state government. The historic split effected by Sharad Pawar in 1978 took place against this background. History repeated itself in 1999, when after falling out with Sonia Gandhi, Pawar (who was technically expelled from the party) formed the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). In Maharashtra, this party created yet another split in the Maratha elite who were by then quite disintegrated and engaged in a power game without any broader orientation. Before that, individual Maratha leaders experimented with the idea of operating outside the Congress fold by aligning themselves with the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in 1995.

Continued Decline of Congress

Both these stories of the dominant party and dominant caste require mention since they constitute the backdrop to the most recent fall of both the Congress and the Maratha elite in the assembly election. After the defeat in 1995, the edifice of Maratha dominance had weakened and the Congress also did not manage to regain its dominant position. It can be argued that a rewriting of the script began in 1995. That the Congress and the NCP came back to power in 1999 and in two subsequent elections owed much to contingent factors and the inability of the Shiv Sena and BJP to function as effective opposition parties after 1999. The continued success of the Congress (and the NCP) can only be described as

“survival amid decline” (Palshikar et al 2014). “Congress politics” could not go beyond an uncomfortable and thin majority, and the two Congress parties together could not register a robust vote share in the state, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1: Congress and Nationalist Congress Party Performance in Assembly Elections, 1995–2014

	Congress		NCP	
	Vote (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats
1995	31.0	80	-	-
1999	27.2	75	22.6	58
2004	21.1	69	18.8	71
2009	21.0	82	16.4	62
2014	18.0	42	17.3	41

Source: CSDS Data Unit

The electorate’s turn in the parliament election and the popularity of Narendra Modi’s leadership served to decisively uproot the Congress (it won only two seats out of 48). In a sense, with the defeat of the Congress in Maharashtra, one of the last fortresses of the party in the country fell (Deshpande-Birmal 2014). After that, it was unrealistic to expect a strong Congress comeback, and the assembly election results have confirmed that. For Maharashtra, this election means that politics in the state has finally shifted away from the dominance of the Congress. Whether the two Congress parties remained allies or turned foes was not very important in shaping their rout. Both had lost credibility among their traditional supporters; they both suffered from a trust deficit; they lacked leadership (the NCP may nominally be led by Pawar, but he has had only limited control over the party and much less appeal among voters); and they were handicapped by allegations of corruption. So, the election was only a matter of deciding the scale of their defeat (for details of the outcome and its sociological correlates, see Palshikar-Birmal 2014).

But more than the defeat of the Congress and NCP, what marks a new era for the politics of the state is the desertion of Maratha voters from the two Congress parties. Again, as we noted, the unease among the Marathas is not new. Apart from factionalism among the elite, the 1990s saw the political dispersal of the community. Realising that the utility of the Congress as a political vehicle for upholding the interests of the Maratha community was coming to an end, the Maratha elite had already begun distancing itself from the

Congress. At the same time, the Maratha community had begun distancing itself from the leadership of the elites. Through both these processes, political fragmentation of the community had been taking place for some time. For instance, ordinary voters from the Maratha community began to vote for non-Congress parties from 1995 onwards (as shown in Palshikar et al 2014).

The assembly election of 2014 signified the culmination of this process. In a sense, politics in Maharashtra has been much more resistant to changes. Unlike Tamil Nadu or Andhra Pradesh where dramatic breaks with the previous regime took place, the process in Maharashtra has been slow, sometimes convoluted, and even imperceptible. It first took the histrionics of Bal Thackeray and the arousing communal passions in 1994-95 to displace the Congress from power. Now, the larger-than-life image of Modi and the goodwill enjoyed by the newly elected BJP government in New Delhi has contributed to the defeat of the Congress. Compared to 1995, this defeat may have more far-reaching implications.

Three questions now arise: who replaces the Congress? What new social coalition replaces the Marathas? And what happens to Maratha politics?

Battle for Congress Space

For the time being, the BJP has replaced the Congress. But the processes that characterise the state's politics are somewhat complex. It will be interesting to see if the BJP only replaces the Congress party or if it will replace Congress politics itself.

The NCP aimed at replacing the Congress by occupying its space. It was qualified for this because it had stalwarts among the Maratha political elite; it controlled local networks of political and material power; and being a faction of the Congress, it was in a position to win over the party's following. However, by the time the NCP came on to the scene, the Maratha elite's credibility was on the wane. Its ability to even protect agrarian interests was under a cloud. Most of the Maratha elite had diversified into real estate and other urban enterprises with a potential to garner resources. While the NCP was mainly identified as a party of Maratha interests, it was neither able to serve as a platform for all the Maratha elite nor could it enthuse the larger Maratha community to support it. Soon, it became a party of only western Maharashtra. In this election, it won 41 seats, of which 19 are from western Maharashtra where it is seen as a party of the establishment. As such the non-Congress/non-establishment space cannot be occupied by the NCP.

This limitation means that the Shiv Sena and the BJP had ample space and opportunity in Maharashtra. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Shiv Sena emerged as the main political alternative to the Congress. Both in the 1990 and 1995 assembly elections, the Sena penetrated the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions of the state while retaining its hold over the Mumbai-Thane and Konkan regions. A coalition with the Shiv Sena helped the BJP to gradually consolidate its position in all these regions, mainly in competition with the Shiv Sena. The BJP's more prominent leaders also emerged from the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions (and of late from Mumbai-Thane). While this finally caused the collapse of their alliance, it has now thrown up the critical question of who occupies the political space being vacated by the Congress. It seems that neither the BJP nor the Shiv Sena is yet in a position to do that, and a keen tussle between the two is bound to take place in the near future.

For now, the BJP has expanded its base in Vidarbha and is locked in a battle with the Shiv Sena in Marathwada and Mumbai-Thane. Meanwhile, the Congress and NCP face a tough challenge in western Maharashtra. Both the BJP and Shiv Sena have made their presence felt in this region. In fact, the BJP emerged as the largest party in the region,

both in terms of votes (26%) and seats (25 of 70). Part of this success was because western Maharashtra is not only relatively well-off, but also next only to Mumbai-Thane in terms of urbanisation. This helped the BJP's impressive performance in the region. Equally importantly, many strong Maratha leaders chose to align with the BJP in the assembly election. So, the BJP success can in part be explained by the switching of loyalties. If the BJP expands further in this region, it will have the two larger regions of the state—Vidarbha and western Maharashtra—under its influence, putting it in a comfortable position to replace the Congress.

New Social Equations

Wherever the BJP has replaced the Congress, it has also brought in new social equations. Since the 1990s, in Maharashtra, the BJP has consistently adopted a pro-Other Backward Class (OBC) strategy. When pro-Mandal forces were making all the appropriate ideological noises, the BJP in Maharashtra presented not one but many non-Maratha and non-Brahman leaders. They included N S Farande, Anna Dange, Pandurang Fundkar, Gopinath Munde, and of late, Eknath Khadse, Sudhir Mungantiwar, and Vinod Tawde. Thus, in most regions of the state, the party has a non-Brahmin face. The voter base of the party is also becoming more diverse, and it is, in particular, cultivating a following among various OBC sections. With its traditional base among the urban, trading, and white-collar sections, and Brahmins in particular, the party sits pretty on a social coalition of the upper castes and OBCs. This is more or less the same strategy it has adopted in many other states. The recent election paid rich dividends to the BJP in terms of consolidating this social coalition— it won handsomely in all urban areas of the state (53 of the 100 urban seats, with nearly 35% of the vote share); it managed to marginalise the Shiv Sena in Mumbai-Thane with the help of middle-class Gujarati and Marathi votes; and as a post-election survey^[1] shows, it received 52% percent of the votes among upper castes and 38% among OBCs.

This new equation (of urban, upper castes, and OBCs) is bound to affect the social bases of politics in Maharashtra. It contrasts with the social bases of Congress politics in the state. In the near future, this could aggravate the crisis in Maratha hegemony. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a division in the Maratha elite and a disjunction between the elite and Maratha masses. The elite has broadly adopted a dual strategy to handle the crisis. On the one hand, it tries to consolidate community identity, and, on the other hand, makes compromises for retaining local power. Since the 2004 election, the Maratha leadership has resorted to a militant politics of symbolism (claiming both Marathi identity and appropriating the Shivaji legacy), and to a politics of assertion (by demanding that all Marathas be considered backward). These indicate that the Maratha leadership will bank on emotive issues and consolidating a caste bloc rather than accommodating different social sections. This response betrays its limits. Since 1995, the political response of the Maratha leadership has been one of compromise and subservience. When the Shiv Sena-BJP government came to power in 1995, many Maratha leaders either joined the new coalition or supported it. Their limited objective was to protect their immediate material interests and also their family-based patronage networks.

Where Does Maratha Politics Go?

The results of the 2014 assembly election have firmly removed the Maratha elite from state power, and threaten to evolve a new political regime, though the socio-economic contours of the new dispensation are not yet clear. . These developments deepen the crisis for the Maratha elite. While their urban links may help them forge new equations and integrate themselves with the new regime, this is bound to further distance the elite from the Maratha community—both from their own caste and the general public. The immediate stance of the Maratha leadership and electorate in terms of electoral choices remains

uncertain. What we see is a fragmentation of Maratha politics. As far as the electorate is concerned, the Shiv Sena has emerged as the main beneficiary of Maratha votes, getting three of every 10 Maratha votes. But the picture across regions is more complicated. The data in Table 2 indicates that the battle over Maratha votes is yet to be fought to the finish. In north Maharashtra and Vidarbha, the BJP has received more support among Maratha-Kunbi voters; in Marathwada, the NCP attracted Maratha voters; and in western Maharashtra and Mumbai-Thane, the Shiv Sena had a clear edge among Marathas.

Table 2: Maratha-Kunbi Vote by Regions, 2014, % distribution in each region

	BJP	SS	Cong	NCP
North Maharashtra	35	21	11	9
Vidarbha	41	23	20	7
Marathwada	23	22	7	32
Mumbai-Thane	18	43	12	5
West Maharashtra	18	36	11	25
Total	24	29	11	17

Note: Konkan not included because of a very small sample from Maratha-Kunbi community there.

Source: Post-election Survey; N=449. Row percentages do not add up to 100 since others are not included.

Given the history of the past two decades, it seems unlikely that the Maratha community will back any particular party en bloc. Similarly, given the factionalism in the Maratha elite, they too are unlikely to choose any one party. Further, the material interests of the Maratha elite are now becoming diverse, and this will add to their political dispersal. But, besides choosing their political vehicle, two larger issues will haunt the politics of the Maratha community. The first is that since independence, the Maratha leadership in Maharashtra has been protected and propped up by state power. The elite in the Maratha community do not have the political skills to work away from centres of power. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine how the Maratha leadership will sustain itself outside of power—particularly when the prospects of getting it in the near future are not very bright. The second larger issue pertains to the social and political role of the Maratha elite in the

scheme of things. In terms of numbers, no party can ignore the Maratha community, which constitutes about 30% of the population in the state, the single largest bloc by caste/community. Similarly, in terms of control over resources, no party can ignore the Maratha leadership. And yet, in the last 25 years, the hegemonic status of the Maratha leadership has crumbled. The deep division caused by the attention of most Maratha leaders shifting to urban material interests was one dimension of the decline. The initial opposition to Mandal and the subsequent appropriation of the Mandal discourse to demand reservations (Deshpande 2014) eroded the hegemony in rural Maharashtra.

Continuing internal crises, loss of hegemony, a changed political economy, and now defeat at the hands of the BJP may persuade the Maratha leadership to adapt to the new situation, accepting a less pre-eminent position in the politics of the state and making its peace with the new ruling dispensation.

BJP's Options

This would leave the BJP with multiple options. One would be to sideline the Marathas and build on its electoral base among OBCs and upper castes. This would mirror its strategy in Uttar Pradesh (UP) where it has successfully built on the support of upper and backward castes. It can thus afford to keep the Yadavs and Muslims out of its social base. This strategy is attractive in that it allows the party to neutralise regionally dominant interests. Its limitation is that it is too specific to UP, where Scheduled Caste (SC) voters are with it, enabling the party to isolate the Yadavs. In Bihar too, by winning over a section of SC voters, the BJP can afford to sideline the Yadavs (while it is making inroads among Kurmis). The composition of the Bihar-UP model is a response to politics centered on one major peasant OBC community. In Maharashtra, this strategy would translate into a more broad-based consolidation of OBCs and keeping the Marathas out. Numerically, this is possible if the BJP can also win a large share of Adivasi and SC votes. But the Maratha community is far too powerful in the state for the BJP to be able to ignore it altogether.

Therefore, the BJP could instead adopt the Karnataka model; where the party slowly built—through the 1990s—its base among the Lingayat community, allowing leaders from the community to control the state unit and become major players in state politics. The BJP may be tempted to buy peace with the Marathas, but it may not still fully adopt the Karnataka model. Maharashtra and Karnataka are similar in that the BJP did not have any firm social base in both states after the Jan Sangh days. In Maharashtra, the Jan Sangh never went much beyond a core upper-caste base created by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) through its anti-Gandhi-Nehru sentiment. What has been called the “vernacularisation of Hindutva” (Hansen 1999) or neo-Hindutva (Vora-Palshikar 1990) has occurred outside the traditional RSS-Jan Sangh politics in Maharashtra. After the Shiv Sena successfully capitalised on it, the BJP began poaching on non-upper castes through Munde. So, its non-Brahminical face is a recent acquisition. This is both a limitation and an opportunity. It is obviously a limitation in that it is not seen as the party of *bahujans*. But because of this, the party has the option of shaping itself in the most politically beneficial way—it does not have the historical burden of pleasing any one community (save the upper castes, who anyway constitute a very small proportion of the state's population).

The rise of the BJP in alliance with the Shiv Sena was the first stage of the evolution of the BJP in Maharashtra. During that stage, the party cultivated OBCs (encouraged a number of non-brahmin leaders), spread in Vidarbha, and made an entry to Marathwada. Now the party has entered the second stage of its growth in the state. At this juncture, the BJP has to make firmer choices on its leadership options, and its options for a social coalition that it would like to cultivate over the next decade. With a demoralised Congress and a cynical

NCP, the BJP faces no immediate challenge. This will allow it to experiment with its options.

Note

[1] A post-election survey was conducted jointly by Lokniti-CSDS and the Department of Politics and Public Administration, Savitribai Phule Pune University at 105 locations in the state, spanning 35 assembly constituencies. For more details, see www.lokniti.org

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