

# Towards neo—statism

## by Pramod Kumar

GOOD governance is unpopular, this spoke Mr. L.K. Advani. Does good governance mean mobilising resources for the state without giving adequate emphasis on issues relating to unemployment social justice, etc.? The sole aim of this resource mobilisation is to come out of the debt trap. This is a vicious circle. The real purpose of governance gets defeated – to provide social justice to the people. This kind of politics enriches the state and makes people poorer. That is why the President of Brazil, in response to a question on how his state was doing, said his state was doing very well but people were not.

The then BJP government in Himachal Pradesh religiously followed the dictates of the new economic policy, which even Mr. Manmohan Singh is constrained to follow in totality. It is this approach to politics which had a bearing on the recent elections along with the other factors like the increasing dominance of the organised interest groups on electoral politics, autocratic functioning of a leader, caste polarisation, etc. In other words, the hope that the Ram Mandir slogan and premature dismissal of the government would be able to neutralise the caste differentiation, the autocratic functioning of a leader and the harsh economic measures initiated, was belied.

The 1993 election results have shown that the legitimacy of the government in power declines faster due to the mismatch between the electoral promises and the stark realities of the new economic policies. In the 1990 poll the BJP secured 44 seats with 41.2 per cent of the votes and the Congress eight seats with 37.01 per cent of the votes polled in Himachal Pradesh. The total votes polled were 67.62 per cent. In the 1993 elections the BJP got eight seats and there was a swing of 6.78 per cent votes against it. Besides this the decline in the percentage of votes polled in the constituencies the BJP contested in 1990 was around 18. The decline in legitimacy is symptomatic of the discourse initiated by the new economic policy and electoral promises made by the competing political parties.

With the changes in the global economy and the shift in the national priorities, a new role is being attributed to the state. In the recent elections this was witnessed as a competition between the forces of neo-statism represented by the BJP, the status-quoism or populism articulated by the Congress and transformational politics going by default. The logic of the new economic policy will make the political party in power more vulnerable to pressures of neo-statism and compel it away from populism and negate the forces of transformational politics. This is what happened in Himachal Pradesh.

Neo-statism became a dominant form of political functioning in Himachal Pradesh, which is being seen and described as "good governance" and, therefore, "unpopular". The inevitable logic of neo-statism is (a) aggrandisement of the state and pauperisation of the people, and (b) excessive reliance on the bureaucratic apparatus rather than on the party cadres and non-government organisations to launch welfare programmes like Antyodaya or Water for Each Household.

The shift from the earlier form of statism – in which the emphasis used to be on nationalisation, the administering of prices, the control of wages, etc. – to neo-statism with a veneer of the liberal non-regulatory state had a bearing on the elections. The BJP government in Himachal became an aggressive articulator of neo-statism. No doubt, the Himachal regime like the central government was faced with a financial crunch with an estimated annual income of Rs.299 crore and a total expenditure of Rs. 722 crore. The interest on the outstanding debt has been Rs. 293 crore (1993-94). To come out of this crisis, the BJP government started mobilising resources, and in the case of resistance indulged in arm-twisting tactics. To illustrate the point, the BJP government took the following initiatives: The support price on apples was withdrawn; ad-hoc employees were retrenched; the fees on the medical card for government hospitals was raised four times, power tariff was raised; and privatisation of power generation was initiated.

When these measures were resisted by the people, the government used to repressive state apparatus. The resistance was natural. During the past four decades a large section of the people has been alienated from the state, and the notion that common people must make sacrifices to enrich the state is detested. This is logical because the rulers, including the BJP politicians, have failed to present an austere way of living and, on the contrary, people perceive them as the misappropriators or even looters of the state.

Then the resistance to the harsh economic measures was countered by using force. For instance, the movement launched against the withdrawal of the support price for apples was suppressed by using force and, consequently, three persons were killed and many injured.

Similarly, when the employees resorted to strike, first it was repressed by using all kinds of methods, and later they were made to suffer under the pseudo-moralist stance of "no work, no pay". This is so because the question of work ethics and ethos is a larger one, relating to distortions like corruption to which the BJP government's performance matched with that of the Congress. Further, it was a pseudo-moralist stance because it was confined only to the strike period. TO deny people the right to protest in a peaceful manner and punish them for the same has the following implications:

(a) It encourages authoritarian forms of politics. To physically suppress strikes is to negate the democratic forms of grievance redressal. It is possible that people resorting to strike may or may not have genuine demands, but it is within their democratic right to resort to such measures. That is why it is accepted that democracy is the costliest form of government.

(b) These aggressive initiatives in the name of "good governance" provide impetus to violent forms of protest.

The election results have resolved the BJP's paradox between the denial of democratic rights and seeking a democratic mandate for the same. The populist or status-quoist thrust of politics represented by Congress could sweep the elections. This thrust occupied a large space in the political campaign of the Congress. It promised people to make Himachal the "fruit bowl of India and Switzerland of the Himalayas..." All those daily wage employees/casual labourers retrenched by the BJP government would be re-employed. The rights of employees as per trade union practices and the Industrial Disputes Act should be protected... The dismissed employees who became victims of the BJP apathy and discrimination would be reinstated immediately."

These promises provided continuity to the politics of populism but with a difference. Until the eighties slogans like "Garibi Hatao", "Land to the tillers" and "Social justice for all" had been raised from time to time. All these slogans, along with the promise of building up a socialist society remained the hallmark of Indian politics.

However, after mid-eighties the slogan of "Justice for all" was replaced by "Justice for the backward castes". In the Himachal elections, this acquired an interesting dimension. The rejection of the Mandal commission report by the BJP government strengthened its politics of neo-statism and alienated a large section of the population. Lower Himachal having a 20 to 40 per cent OBC population has been the traditional stronghold of the BJP. For instance, in Kangra district in the last elections the BJP secured 12 of the 16 seats, while the Congress got only one. In the 1993 poll the BJP could secure only three seats while the Congress won 12.

So strong was the feeling among the people against the BJP that Mr. Vidya Sagar, a former BJP minister and popular OBC leader lost the election. Caste-based factionalism within the BJP also worked to its disadvantage. The growing feeling among the Rajputs that they were not being given their due place by the Brahmins proved fatal even for Mr. Shanta Kumar. One of the reasons for the defeat of the former Chief Minister was this. In his constituency there are 16,000 Rajputs, 14,000 Chaudhris (a backward caste), 6,000 Harijans and

12,000 Brahmins. It was the Rajput-Choudhary alliance that contributed to Mr. Shanta Kumar's defeat.

The rejection of the Mandal Commission report by the BJP government provided the Congress an opportunity to use this as a strategy in coopt a sizable section of the OBC's. This became easier in the absence of the Janata Dal from the scene. The Congress's election campaign emphasised that it would reverse the policies of the BJP. This was more a negative campaign and the issues relating to social justice found articulation in an indirect manner. This, in a limited way, provided expression to the populist rhetoric of the pre-1966 phase.

Both the BJP and the Congress reinforced the Himachali identity. The emphasis of the BJP campaign was not on issues relating to social justice, but on "self-reliant Himachal Pradesh" and Hindutva. Even sants and sadhus were pushed into the election campaign, of course without much success. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad mobilised sants and sadhus to hold congregations at about 800 places. Moving away from people's politics inevitably pushed the BJP into the lap of Hindutva and regional chauvinism.

The politics of religious revivalism was brought to the level of gimmickry to garner votes of women. In Himachal Pradesh, the number of women voters is higher than that of men voters. There are 1,29,855 women voters and 1,15,458 men voters. In around 26 constituencies women voters could have played a decisive role. It is in this context that even the observance of fast for the longevity of their husbands by women (Karva Chauth) was made an election issue. Advertisements congratulating women on Karva Chauth were issued by Mr. Shanta Kumar. The women were asked to protest against the ban on the people for visiting The Ridge on the fasting day to see the moon.

The politics of neo-statism and the autocratic functioning of a leader reinforced each other. Interestingly, even many of the beneficiaries of the Antyodaya scheme initiated by the BJP voted against the party. This was made mainly due to the excessive reliance on the bureaucracy rather on the party or non-governmental organisations to implement welfare programmes. The beneficiaries identified themselves with the bureaucracy rather than with the party. The government employees were unhappy with the BJP and so were these beneficiaries.

The Himachal elections have shown that there is a visible absence of those forces which do not subscribe to neo-statism and status-quoism or populism. This, in fact is a serious pointer and even a challenge to all those who are committed to social justice, equality and, above all, to a genuine and vibrant democracy to nurture and shape alternative political and social forces to transform the people's conditions.