

M.A.POLITICAL SCIENCE IInd SEM

COMPARATIVE POLITICS (204)

TOPIC-POLITICAL ELITES, THEORY OF ELITES & POLITICAL ELITES IN INDIA

UNIT-IV

In political science, elite theory is a theory of the state that seeks to describe and explain power relationships in contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority, consisting of members of the economic elite and policy-planning networks, holds the most power—and that this power is independent of democratic elections.[1] Through positions in corporations or on corporate boards, and influence over policy-planning networks through financial support of foundations or positions with think tanks or policy-discussion groups, members of the "elite" exert significant power over corporate and government decisions. The basic characteristics of this theory are that power is concentrated, the elites are unified, the non-elites are diverse and powerless, elites' interests are unified due to common backgrounds and positions and the defining characteristic of power is institutional position.[2]

Elite theory opposes pluralism (more than one system of power), a tradition that assumes that all individuals, or at least the multitude of social groups, have equal power and balance each other out in contributing to democratic political outcomes representing the emergent, aggregate will of society. Elite theory argues either that democracy is a utopian folly, as it is traditionally viewed in the conservative Italian tradition, or that democracy is not realizable within capitalism, as is the view of the more Marxist-compatible contemporary elite theory permutation.

Even when entire groups are ostensibly completely excluded from the state's traditional networks of power (historically, on the basis of arbitrary criteria such as nobility, race, gender, or religion), elite theory recognizes that "counter-elites" frequently develop within such excluded groups. Negotiations between such disenfranchised groups and the state can be analyzed as negotiations between elites and counter-elites. A major problem, in turn, is the ability of elites to co-opt counter-elites.

Concept of Political Elite:

Who are the elite? Elite are the most influential and prestigious stratum in a society. The 'elite' are those persons who are recognized as outstanding leaders in a given field. Thus, there are political, religious, scientific, business, and artistic elite. Pareto, Mosca, Wright Mills, Lasswell, Mannheim, Bottomore, etc., have given different definitions. Parry Geriant (1969) has defined elite as "small minorities who play an exceptionally influential part in the affairs of society in specific fields"

Bank (1966) has described elite as "decision-makers whose power is not subject to control by any other body in the society". Nadel (1956) maintains that elite are "those who have an influence over the fate of the society because of their superiority".

The members of an elite group have important influence in shaping the values and attitudes held by their segment of society. Wright Mills (1956) has described them as “those who make decisions having major consequences, who are able to realise their will even if others resist, and who have the most of what there is to have—money, power and prestige”.

I describe elite as “a dominant group which possesses distinctiveness and exclusiveness”.

Secondly, the term does not apply to any one person but refers to a plurality, a collectivity of persons, however small it may be.

Thirdly, this identifiable collectivity has certain attributes and skills which give it not only a certain superiority but also power of decision-making and influencing others.

Lastly, elite is a relative term. A group is identified as an elite group in a particular field in which it is ‘power exerciser’ or ‘influential’ or commands ‘excellence’, but in other groups, these elite may be considered as ‘ordinary’ members.

On this basis, the term ‘political elite’ may be defined as “a group of high stratum decision-makers in political culture or concrete political structure which monopolises political power, influences major political policies and occupies all important posts of political command”

If we were to operationalise this term, we could say, political elite include those:

- (a) Who are elected/nominated to central and state legislatures,
- (b) Who occupy important positions in national or state-level political parties,
- (c) Individuals who do not hold any formal positions either in the government or in political parties but are still considered as persons of great political prestige and power because they control power-exercisers (e.g., Gandhi, Jaya Prakash Narayan)

Wright Mills (1956) has used the term ‘power elite’ for the political elite who monopolise power and rule the country. Pareto (1935) has called them ‘governing elite’, Marx, referred to them as ‘ruling class’, Riesman as ‘veto group’, and Floyd Hunter as ‘top leaders’. I have used the term ‘oligarchic elite’ for them in my own empirical work on political elite in Bihar. I describe the ‘oligarchic elite’ as those who control the functional groupings within the structure with the minimum consultation of the ‘subjugated elite’.

Recruitment and Changing Character of Elite in Post-Independence India:

With the above mentioned definition of political elite, we will now examine the recruitment and change in the nature of the elite operating in the political field in India after independence.

This change can be analysed by classifying the political elite in five phases:

- (i) Immediately after independence phase (i.e., 1947 to April 1952), in which there was no longer any struggle between the people and the government and in which though the interests of the people and

the power elite were one and indivisible (i.e., rebuilding the society), the latter were more preoccupied with the problems of restoration of law and order after partition, refugee resettlement, maintenance of communal peace, and the controversy over the redistribution of territories between various states

(ii) Consolidation phase (i.e., April 1952 to March 1962 or MPs, MLAs and party office-holders elected in April 1952 and April 1957 elections), in which the political elite worked for the economic uplift and social development through the Five-Year Plans.

(iii) Chaotic phase (i.e., April 1962 to March 1971 or individuals elected in April 1962 and March 1967 elections), in which non-congress and coalition governments came into power in several states affecting the inter-state and state-centre relations.

(iv) Authoritarian phase (i.e., March 1971 to November 1989 or individuals elected in March 1971, March 1977, January 1980, December 1984, and November 1989 elections), in which one person was catapulted to the position of supreme national leadership, first Indira Gandhi for 16 years (excluding period from March 1977 to January 1980) and then Rajiv Gandhi for five years and the power-came to believe in the personality cult, and in which all plans for change and development of society were centralized.

(v) Multiple-party phase (i.e., December 1989 till April 1999) in which except in NarasimhaRao's period of 5 years, in the remaining period, a number of political parties joined hands to rule the country on a common-programme basis (V.P. Singh ministry for 11 months—December 1989 to November 1990), Chandra Shekhar ministry for about eight months—November 1990 to June 1991), AtalBihari Vajpayee ministry for 13 days—from May 1996 to May 1996), P.V. NarasimhaRao ministry for five years (June 1991 to 1996), United Front governments of Deve Gowda (June 1996 to April 1997) for 11 months and I.K. Gujral (April 1997 to March 1998) for one year and BJP-led government of A.B. Vajpayee (March 1998 to April 1999). Who were the elite in the first phase?

These elite were those who had a stable economic background (though politics was not their profession for earning their livelihood), were highly educated, mostly belonged to the upper castes, and were committed to societal interests. Their socio-political ideology was based on nationalism, liberalism and religio-cultural reforms.

This first generation of power-wielders in free India had earned their reputation for courage, vision and action, and acquired their charisma before they stepped into office as inheritors of political power and earned it more through functioning in office. The elite in the second (consolidation) phase, particularly those elected in the 1952 elections, some of whom had only a part-time interest in politics.

They wanted rewards in the form of a political office for participating in the national struggle for independence. These elite caused a certain amount of disequilibrium in the beginning in their party structures but their pressures for active participation in politics were pitched in such a low key that they were soon integrated in their party systems.

Then came the 1957 elections when the long established dominance of the so-called political sufferers was broken and political power was placed in the hands of a new breed of elite who were either pettyland-holders or traders, businessmen, professional persons, small industrialists or social workers. These elite were not as highly politicized as their older counterparts. They thought that since they could trust

the integrity of old professional politicians, they need not concern themselves quite so directly with politics.

Over the years, yet newer elite further down the social scale appeared in the 1962 elections representing the intermediate and lower castes, middle-class professions, small farmers, industrial work-ers, or even obscure religious and social sects, to name a few, seeking entry into the political decision-making processes.

Though these elite came to seek a greater role in policy formulation, the older elite still re-tained their influence. There was thus toleration on the part of the new and accommodation on the part of the old elite. Both old and new elite re-vised their values to fit situations and establish new relationships.

This type of interaction between the old and the new elite implies a dilution of the pure force theory group of elite or that the position of the old elite de-pended upon some sort of bargain. We can thus say that change in the elite structure up to 1967 was slow and 'peaceful', not involving any 'con-flict' in Marxian terminology.

In the 1967, 1971, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1996 and 1998 elec-tions, emerged the elite amongst whom many were found to have politics as their major source of livelihood. They believed more in using the ties of kinship, caste and language to smoothen the way through the corridors of power.

They were blind to the practicalities of the plans and believed in seeking cooperation of the masses by coining attractive slo-gans and speaking half-truths. They posed as democrats; even their slogans were democratic but their actions belied their utterances. Democ-racy as a way of life was foreign to their nature and nurture. Ideologically, there were four types of elite functioning in 1967-1971, 1971-1989, and 1989-1999 phases: traditionalists, rationalists, moderates and synthetics.

The second and the third types had two sub-variations:

ADVERTISEMENTS:

(a) Those who reflected secular but vested national ideology, and

(b) Those who professed a neo-secular and vested parochial ideology.

Since these elite with different ideologies functioned within the party, the variation in their ideologies led to segmentation of the party which affected the functioning of both the party and its elite at various levels.

Referring to changing eliteship in India, Yogendra Singh has averred: "Among the political elite, there existed a high degree of cultural and status homogeneity before Independence. All of them came from upper castes and had an urban, middle-class background of English education. The top group was exposed to foreign culture and was educated there; hence their self-image in terms of expected roles was also that of a generalist rather than a specialist. Following independence, this pattern of elite composition has considerably changed."

Referring to trends of change in the present political leadership, Yo-gendra Singh holds:

(i) There is increasing influence of rural-based political leaders;

(ii) There is slight decrease in the influence of leaders drawn from various professions;

(iii) There is significant increase in the number of persons belonging to the middle class;

(iv) There is greater articulation of regional and interest-oriented goals in political cultural ide-ologies;
and

(v) There is slight breakdown in the exclusiveness of upper castes to the elite position. And what was stated by Yogendra Singh 25 years ago is true even today.

Typology of Political Elite:

We can compare the old and the present elite by developing a typology of elite by referring to their values and ideologies and their differential orientation to the society as a whole, i.e., their 'public' or 'collective' interest and their 'private' or 'individual' interest, considering public interest, as a necessary condition for desire for modernisation. Indicating public interest by 'P' and self interest by 'S', we get four types of elite: (i) P-, S- (ii) P-, S+ (iii) P+-,S- and (iv) P+-,S+-. We can term these four types as indifferent, manipulative, progressive, and rationalist elite respectively. In this classification, though both the progressive and the rationalist elite work for public interest, the former believe that the course of progress moves on automatically regardless of the interference of men and is not subject to human control while the latter believe that progress rests upon conscious control.

Applying this classification, we could say, the present elite are more indifferent (P-,S-) and manipulative (P-,S+) in comparison to the progressive (P+,S-) and rationalist (P+,S+) elite of the past. We could also maintain that the present elite are 'irrational specifics' in comparison to 'rational-universalists' of the past.

Circulation of Political Elite:

The recruitment and the changing character of the elite in India in different phases (after political independence) can also be discussed in terms of Pareto's theory of circulation of elite. If the theory of 'circulation of elite' refers to the process of movement in which individuals circulate between the elite and the non-elite, I would submit, on the basis of my own study of political elite, that this theory does not hold good in the context of Indian society.

In India, the 'governing' elite at a higher political culture base (say national level) are recruited not from the 'non-governing' elite at the same level but from the governing elite functioning as a lower political cultural base (say state, district or block levels).

These elite of lower political base are found holding important posts in state legislatures or state political parties, etc., before becoming office-holders at the higher political base. Once these elite rise from state or district level, they never go back to the old level but continue to function at the higher political level as long as they remain active in politics.

This, however, does not mean that they cease to take interest in politics at the level from which they have moved up in the hierarchy. This means, there is no circulation but only an upward movement of the elite. However, if Pareto's theory refers to a process in which one member of the elite group is replaced by another within the group of governing elite, we may concede that his theory does explain the political phenomenon of 'movement of the elite' in the context of our society also. Bottomore maintains that both conceptions are to be found in Pareto's work, although the former predominates.

My study (of political elite) revealed two types of movements (not circulations):

(i) Movement from lower to higher strata of governing elite both functioning at macro-level, and

(ii) Movement from sub-category functioning at micro-structural level to sub-category functioning at macro-structural level.

In the former, I found circulation between 'oligarchic' (dominant) and 'subjugant' (dominated) elite and between 'radical' activists and 'passive' activists. Activists functioning at micro-level ultimately joined the ranks of activists at the macro-level with the result that some of the activists already functioning at this level were deprived of their monopoly of power.

This elite mobility may be explained in terms of:

(i) The rise of new political interests; and

(ii) The rise of new elite with more manipulating qualities.

To us, therefore, both individual and structural factors are important in the social ascent or social descent of the elite. Schumpeter also believed that both the individual qualities and the social factors are important in the circulation of elite.

The Marxian approach, which is basically non-elitist, views the relations between the elite (privileged class which commands power and wealth) and the non-elite (classes which do not possess either of these) as based on conflict, in which effort is made to overthrow the 'power elite' to occupy its position. My study revealed that the process of overthrowing the elite in power and succeeding them is not always based on conflict, but that it involves manipulation, toleration, accommodation, compromise and bargain too.

It could, therefore, be maintained that we can neither draw from Pareto's theory of 'circulation of elite', nor from Karl Marx's theory of 'class struggle' to understand the changing character of political elite in India. We have to use different approach for analysing the recruitment and the changing structure of elite in India.

Political Elite, Social Change and Modernisation:

Let us now turn our attention to the role of political elite in the modernisation of society.

For analysing this problem, we can divide the elite into two groups (following David Apter's model):

(i) 'Development system' elite, and

(ii) 'Maintenance system' elite.

The former seek to reconstruct society by attempting to mobilise and tap available resources and political energies. Their attack on economic backwardness, in order to achieve material advancement, is through change in institutions and attitudes. The political party or governmental apparatus serves for them as the central instrument for modernisation.

They create new institutions or change old institutions to remove obstacles to economic and social growth. We could say, 'development system' elite are characterised by allegiance to economic and social progress, ideological commitment, and constant policies.

The 'maintenance system' elite, by contrast, are those who give high priority to maintaining and preserving the existing political system instead of advocating economic and social change. They believe in compromise among competing political and interest groups. The elite of this system are characterised by multiple loyalties, tactical flexibility, acceptance of compromise and ideological diffuseness.

Thus, power elite in the maintenance system have a much more limited scope of action, and a wider variety of constraints operates on their development policies. Borrowing Apter's formula, we could say, 'development system' elite fight society and 'maintenance system' elite are prisoners of society.

The present political elite in India who have more vested interests to achieve, belong more to 'maintenance system' than to 'development system' with the result that they have failed to reconstruct the nation's social and economic framework or to develop and implement radical economic policies and social programmes. In the Leninist variant of Marxism, they have failed to convert the masses from automatically separated inchoate individuals into conscious and disciplined agents of total social change.

We in this country can understand this better if we could know first the goals we had set for ourselves in economic, social and political fields after independence and then find out the extent to which our political elite have attempted to achieve these goals and ideals.

Our goals in the economic field are:

Advanced technology, abundant economic production, free trade by curbing industrial monopoly and encouraging competitiveness, freedom of occupation, distributive justice, and ending poverty and destitution; in the political field, our goals are: democracy, decentralisation of power, free public opinion and free elections; in the social field our goals are: equality, mobility, secularism, individualism, a break with traditional customs and rituals, and achieving social status through individual potentialities rather than through birth. But have we achieved these goals?

It cannot be asserted that the political elite alone determine the nature and process of development and modernisation in any society. There are many factors like the structural character of various institutions in society, the competence of the mass of the population, political stability, cultural heritage, and the political pattern, etc., which affect the prosperity of a nation or its development.

Yet, the political elite, being the planners and decision-makers, play a very significant role in the country's development. Nobody would deny that we have made progress in different fields. It may even be conceded that much of our development is due to the efforts of the 'activist' elite we had in the last few decades. But this also is a fact that if our country has as yet reached only its half-way point, it is because our political elite have proved to be a barrier in the process of modernisation of our society in several ways. Their discriminatory attitude, blind conformity to tradition, indifference to development, their vested interests, political rivalries, factionalism and corruption have adversely affected the technological changes taking place in our society.

Can an average Indian be a beneficiary of programmes and policies which are motivated by monopoly-dominated and by powerful pressure per capita consumer expenditure of a few rupees a day? Can a society be modernised by the elite whose 'crash' programmes are to appoint committees and commissions for suggesting, initiating and implementing efficient means and mechanisms for solving various socio-economic problems of the society?

Words and promises can never raise the standards of living of an impoverished people. The elite have to organise specific campaigns with specific objectives. It should not be a snowballing of public opinion. Campaigns should not be based on advertising gimmicks. The elite are not selling any commodity; they are trying to sell people pipe dreams about their whole life. This requires a different kind of insight.

Barriers for Political Elite:

There are some oligarchic activist elite who do possess this insight and who are committed to development, but they too have not been able to do much in our country because of several problems they face in their functioning.

The main problems they face are:

(i) The problem of split ideologies, namely, the ideologies of passive party officialdom, of party militants, of the disinterested and uncommitted rank and file of party members and party identifiers, and the party's public ideology;

(ii) The problem of confusion of cross-cutting issues and alternative preferences; and

(iii) The problem of in-fighting among the elite for power-sharing. "We know that the important political parties functioning at national level these days are conglomerations of groups and sub-groups with conflicting loyalties.

When it becomes difficult to find a solvent to dissolve political and ideological divergences, some members either become apolitical or start encouraging centrifugal forces in the country or in the state or quit the party and join some other party which may offer them some public office. As an illustration, a reference may be made to office-seeking legislators of whom many changed sides at least twice, some three times and a few four times.

This ideological gulf between the office-seeking elite and the ideologically-oriented elite always forces the former to indulge in activities which are usually motivated by extraneous considerations. We could say that the ideologically-oriented elite occupy the political left and right while the office-seeking elite pre-empt the centre. It is these central-ists who not only bring the party into disrepute with the public but also hinder the development and modernisation of the country.

Paradoxically, the upper and lower strata elite blame each other for putting the party in the doldrums and for creating barriers in the development of society. The upper-stratum elite accuse lower-stratum elite of casteism, regionalism, linguistic divisions and communalism while the lower-rung elite blame the ruling elite for parochialism, corruption and slow progress of the country.

This only shows the nature of the relations that exist between upper and lower stratum elite and their mutual suspicions. Dahrendorf has also maintained that mutual suspicion and differential distribution of authority invariably becomes the determining factor of systematic social conflicts.

I have termed the elite nuclei or the upper-stratum elite who monopolise the political power as 'oligarchic' elite and the lower-stratum elite who have an underlying position as the 'subjacent' elite. The concept of 'oligarchic' elite has been developed as an alternative to C. Wright Mills's concept of 'ruling class' in order to pin-point a number of their unsatisfactory features and to demonstrate the theoretical difficulties in accepting them, though all the three concepts refer to the dominant political positions of the group involved.

The oligarchic elite and the subjacent elite do not find a common set of goals. The aims of the oligarchic elite are either so personal (capturing office) or so general (maintaining status quo) or even so radical (reserving 27% seats for OBCs without rational analysis) that they fail to motivate the subjacent elite. The subjacent elite are also unable to articulate their desire for economic improvement and social development or for getting higher offices, much less to organise themselves to obtain them.

The result is that these politically ineffective elite are manipulated by the oligarchic elite, often through promises and slogans that portend economic development, socialism, social justice, end of monopoly, etc., as ends, while at the same time they (the oligarchic elite) themselves operate through largely undemocratic and monopolistic means. On the surface, the oligarchic elite are ideologically motivated, but in practice their ideology seldom remains operative.

As long as the subjacent elite remain inarticulate and thus incapable of holding the oligarchic elite responsible for their suppression, both the big as well as small political cultural groups will continue to be dominated by the oligarchic elite and they will continue to deny political legitimacy to the leaders of the lower rung as well as to the new entrants.

To understand modernisation at a macrocosmic level in India, we have to assess the pattern of economic, social and political development at microcosmic level in its constituent states, and have also to examine the relations between the elite functioning at two different levels, viz., national and state levels.

If we take the relationship between degree of participation in political issues of the oligarchic elite at the state level and the level of monopoly of the oligarchic elite at the national level, and consider the national base as the large political context and the state base as the smaller political context, we may hold that the higher or the lower level of monopolistic tendencies at larger political culture base determines the relative degree of the elite's participation in politics at the smaller political cultural base.

The higher the monopolies at the higher political cultural base, the lesser are the elite to participate in public welfare issues at lower political cultural base. This is because the greater monopoly of elite at the national level discourages the oligarchic elite at the state level in expressing their views freely and frankly. Where political power is concentrated more in the hands of the few oligarchic elite at the national level, the desire to participate in local socio-political issues increases dissatisfaction among the non-monopolistic non-activist elite at the state base, leading to their withdrawal of support to the activist elite in their own state.

The underlying assumption here is that the active oligarchic elite at the state level are likely to be those who aspire to play a significant role not only in the state political culture but also in the larger national political culture. As such, criticism of the oligarchic elite at the national level decreases among the oligarchic political activists at the state level since they are aware of the fact that compliance with the norms of monopolists at the centre has greater relevance to the political roles they hope to play at the country level. This tendency of the activists creates discontent among the non-activists because of which they refuse to cooperate with the activist elite in the state.

As an illustration, we can cite one case. What was the role of elite—both political and non-political—in the emergency period when many leaders of the country were bundled into jails, the press was muzzled, dissenters in all walks of life were harassed and the entire country was enveloped in a fog of fear and uncertainty.

I would say that the elite—the politicians, the intellectuals, the bureaucrats and even the elite in the judiciary—instead of exposing the megalomaniac leaders and the monstrous coercion, corruption and unscrupulousness to the public—became victims of their own prejudice and subconsciously saw in one individual leader the protector of its narrow class interests. During 19 months, the elite cheered like a mob and abdicated its responsibility of giving sober counsel to the government and to the nation.

How is it that the decisions of the emergency passed muster with all types of political decision-makers in parliament? Are we to understand that whatever actions were taken by the government during the emergency, the slow and systematic strangulation of the constitution and democracy that took place was really with the consent of all decision-makers in power? Are we to understand that when laws were passed in Parliament in conditions so blatantly malafide, the activist political elite had no remedy? Are we to understand that emergently and the high-handed behaviour of a few monopolisers of power that followed it were perfectly justified in the eyes of all committed political elite? These are questions that the political elite had best ask of themselves. The point that is being made is that the activist political elite in power fail to perform their roles in a crisis of vast dimensions and delivery in the interests of the society.

I would as well maintain that even after the historic national and state elections of November 1989 and again in May 1996 and February 1998, though the new political elite got an opportunity to exercise their judgement, yet, unfortunately, they wasted this opportunity. Public expectations were that the new political elite in power would curb industrial monopoly, end destitution in a specific period, not allow price-rise beyond the capacity of the common man to pay, build up a viable public distribution system

and establish institutional structure for combating corruption. But so far we have not seen the beginning of the end of a pe-riod of economic stagnation and social decline.

We can now reiterate what was said earlier:

(1) The higher level of monopolistic tendencies at a larger political cul-ture base has resulted in a lower degree of elite participation in politics and hampered their interest in modernising the society.

(2) The few high-stratum elite who occupy dominant positions in the political structure and monopolise political power (conceptualised as 'oligarchic elite') are not at all close-knit and lack any coherence as a political force.

(3) The present elite's central concern, including those who came in power in March 1998 but lost it in April 1999, is achieving and pre-serving power because of which they have failed to establish a close rapport with the people.

(4) The present activist and committed political elite believe neither in conscious rejection of modernisation nor in conscious rejection of traditional order but in the regulation of content, direction and speed of modernisation as well as of certain elements of traditionalism.

To sum up, we maintain that unless the behaviour of the present po-litical elite is motivated more by altruistic values rather than by the mundane or pragmatic considerations, the goals of modernisation will not be achieved and the struggle for social change will continue to be ham-pered.

