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978-0-521-05281-8 - The Dynamics of Indian Political Factions: A Study of District Councils in the State of Maharashtra

Mary C. Carras

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Factions are the principal structural media through which the political process is modulated in systems of the one-party variety.¹ V. O. Key described factional groupings as 'party systems within the dominant party'.² He was referring to factional systems in one-party states in the United States. His observation, however, may be applicable to India, which has often been described as a dominant one-party system. In recent years it has become necessary to modify this characterization: as a result of the 1967 general elections, the dominance of the Congress Party was seriously challenged, both in the parliamentary and in the state assembly elections.³ The 1971 elections, however, seem to have re-established the dominant one-party model. In any event, the present study does not deal with factions in India as a whole but in one of the more important states of India: Maharashtra. This was one of the few states in which the Congress retained its dominance after the Fourth (1967) General Elections, and its political status has not changed appreciably since then. Hence, Key's description of factional groupings is definitely meaningful for Maharashtra.

What I have attempted is an analysis of factionalism, as a specific facet of political behavior manifested in two rival groups within the dominant political party in Maharashtra, the Indian National Congress. The study was conducted at the district level in the period between September 1964 and May 1966. The groups to which I refer, however, began to take shape in 1962, at about the time when popular elections were held to choose the members of the newly inaugurated bodies of local government in the State.* And it is that division which I investigated, focussing my examination upon the Congress members of the new local bodies. These have been officially termed 'Zilla Parishads' or 'District Councils'

* Maharashtra was the eleventh state⁶ to accept the recommendation of the Government of India to enact legislation implementing the principle of 'democratic decentralization' or Panchayati Raj, which was embodied in the Report of the Balwantray Mehta Committee on Plan Projects.⁷

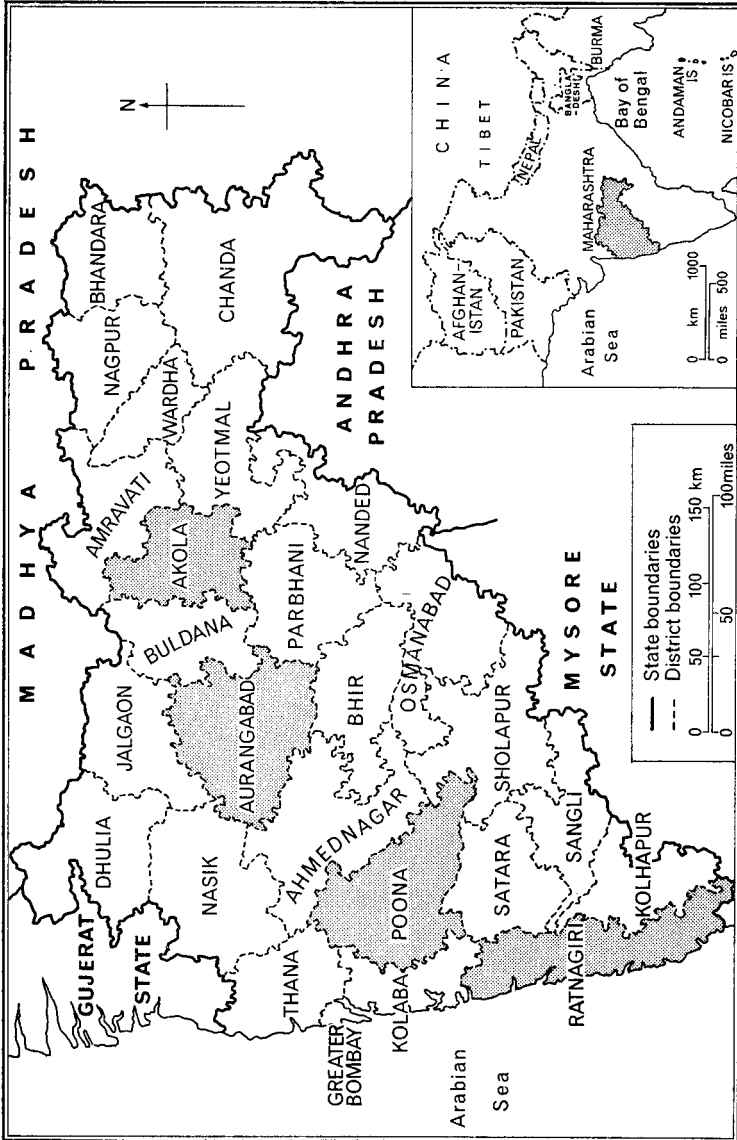
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Map 1

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and both titles will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

I do not mean to imply that these factions emerged suddenly at that particular point in time, or at the district level exclusively. Indeed, I hope to demonstrate later that the conflict which divided these groups had roots in the past, as well as in present conditions, that it had ramifications at higher levels (or rather was itself, possibly, a reflection of higher-level conflicts), and that it may have been inherent in some aspect of the economic philosophy of the Government of India.

As in other states, the functions entrusted to the District Council were entirely of a developmental nature (projects in public works, public health, agriculture, and so on).⁴ Economically, the District Councils were and are largely dependent on State Government funds.⁵ However, the authority with which they were invested, or which they assumed, to make decisions about the distribution of material benefits in the projects and spheres of activity entrusted to them, gave the Zilla Parishads in Maharashtra considerable political weight as relatively independent dispensers of patronage.

In one of the more radical departures from legislation passed in other states, the Government of Maharashtra introduced the principle of direct popular election of the members of the Councils, on a party basis. It thereby injected, inevitably and explicitly, the element of political competition into the new bodies of local government. From the point of view of an observer of Indian politics, it also provided an opportunity to identify and study the contestants involved in such political competition within a large yet compact political and governmental unit – the district.

The governmental and dominant party organization at the state level wields its authority over approximately 40 million people. The governing elite alone (including ministers as well as members of the legislative assembly) is numbered in the hundreds. There are over two hundred and fifty legislative assembly constituencies in the State, and, unlike most western democracies, the organizational units of the party are not coterminous with the electoral constituencies. Thus, one cannot study the interaction between government and party leaders in any particular *electoral* unit. At the taluka* level, also, one must deal with over two hundred units

* The taluka (sometimes also referred to as ‘tahsil’) is a subdivision of the district in the overall administrative structure of the State of Maharashtra. The

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whose population ranges from 30 thousand to approximately 200 thousand (and even up to 400 thousand in a few cases).⁸ What makes this level less useful, however, is the fact that under the Maharashtra version of Panchayati Raj, it is the *district* rather than the *taluka* which is the main executive unit within the three-tier structure of local government.⁹ For this reason also, the village is a less useful arena for study; moreover, the large number of villages (almost 36 thousand in the State)¹⁰ detracts from the academic utility of such a unit for the purposes of a study concerned with the dynamics of the party divisions characteristic of the State.

The district, on the other hand, which is the most important executive body of rural local government in the three-tier scheme in Maharashtra, ranges (generally) from about a million to a million and a half in (rural) population size.¹¹ I have selected for study four out of the twenty-five districts in Maharashtra; and the number of respondents interviewed in connection with this study (one hundred and sixty) constitutes more than a 10% sample of the Councillors in all the Zilla Parishads in the State of Maharashtra, and a 20% sample of Congress Councillors. The population over which these four district councils have jurisdiction constitutes almost 20% of the total rural population of the State. Thus, in terms of the basic characteristic of size, at least, these District Councils are representative of all the Councils in the State.*

The selection of the districts was made with a view to maximizing differences in the broad socio-political environment of the respondents. As the state contains four major administrative divisions which are broadly coterminous with distinct geographical,

collection of revenue and administration of justice have been among the most important functions of administrators in such units. Since the 1961 scheme of local government was introduced in Maharashtra, the taluka has also become in most parts of the state (please see note on p. 149 below for exceptions) one of the units of self-government in the local government structure.

* Excluding Greater Bombay, which is governed by a municipality, there are 25 districts in the State where Zilla Parishads function, extending their jurisdiction mainly over the rural areas.¹²

There was a total of 1,271 elective seats in these 25 Zilla Parishads in 1962.¹³ The results immediately following the elections showed that Congressmen had secured 827 of these seats, which would give me nearly a 20% sample of Congress Councillors. However, many of the independents and other-party members crossed the line into the Congress camp after the elections, so that I cannot validly claim that the 160 Congress respondents in this study constitute a 20% sample of Congressmen originally elected; but they are very close to that.

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social, economic and historical units, it was desirable that all these regions be represented in the study. Each of them differs from the others in terms of its experience in local government, levels of literacy, or the degree of economic development or potential therefor¹⁴ –to mention a few features which would be relevant in a political study of this type. To the extent that the variation in regional attributes is maximized, the districts used are a representative sample. It is believed that the observations, hypotheses and conclusions presented here will reflect, as was intended, the major variations in the political setting of the state as a whole.

With regard to the selection of respondents, it should be noted that once the districts had been selected, the choice of respondents was dictated by the focus of my study – namely, the Congress contingent in the Zilla Parishads. All the Congressmen in each Zilla Parishad were interviewed. In other words, the Congress members and officers in these four Zilla Parishads constitute my basic units of analysis.*

The districts are listed below, together with their corresponding administrative divisions and socio-historical areas:

District	Administrative Division	Socio-historical Area
Ratnagiri	Bombay	Konkan
Poona	Poona	Desh (Deccan)
Aurangabad	Aurangabad	Marathwada
Akola	Nagpur	Vidarbha

My analysis focusses on the members of two groups constituting factional alignments within the Congress Party in each Zilla Parishad (hereinafter sometimes referred to as 'Z.P.'). The immediate issue over which these groups developed concerned the nomination of party candidates for the posts of President, Vice President and Committee Chairmen of the Zilla Parishad. Inasmuch as Congressmen had emerged dominant in almost every Zilla Parishad in the May 1962 elections of Z.P. Councillors,¹⁵ it was the nominating procedure within the Congress Party that became critical in the selection of Council officials, rather than the formal

* All the officers in each of the Zilla Parishads selected were Congressmen. These officers were elected by the members from amongst themselves, once they had been elected to the local body from their respective constituencies. Nominations for the officers' posts were submitted to the membership by each party represented in the Zilla Parishad.

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election which was held in the first general meeting of the Zilla Parishad following the election of Councillors (and, of course, following the nomination of candidates by the various parties represented in the District Council).

Although the party leadership (at least at local levels, which I observed at first hand) exercises control in party meetings over members' behavior through the principle of unanimous voting, it appears that on important issues, such as the selection of leaders – as in this instance – majority voting *is* sanctioned by the party. (Even here, however, the unanimous method of voting is preferred.) In these circumstances, dissidents within the party have an opportunity to challenge the established leaders. The Congress Party apparently had to cope with numerous such challenges following the 1962 elections.¹⁶ In many instances, the 'challengers' presented to the Congress members in the Z.P. their own candidates for office, in opposition to those sanctioned by the established party leadership. I have, therefore, termed the two groups 'Rebels' and 'Loyalists', largely on the basis of the Z.P. Congressmen's vote for or against the official Congress Party slate offered for the consideration of members in the Zilla Parishad Congress Party meeting held after the election of Councillors.* The respondents,

* In the case of Ratnagiri, the procedure for identifying factional membership differed somewhat from that followed in the other districts. Here, the Council President and other officials were elected to their respective posts unanimously. Although there had been a latent opposition group at the time, it did not materialize. The reason for this – given by many respondents – was a most interesting one indeed. It appears that the official Congress candidate for the Z.P. Presidency had complied with the Congress leadership's request a few months earlier to run – in the face of certain defeat – against a popular incumbent Socialist candidate in the parliamentary elections, held in February 1962. As was expected, the Congressman was defeated. His consolation prize was to be the Presidency of the Zilla Parishad. Most of the Congress Councillors apparently felt it would be lacking in grace to deal another defeat upon one who had 'sacrificed' himself, in a manner of speaking, for the Party. Thus, a compromise was worked out whereby two representatives of the latent Rebel group were given top posts in the Zilla Parishad, one as Vice President, and the other as a Committee Chairman. Within a year, however, the Committee Chairman died, and this top post became vacant once again. The factions which had been muted in 1962 now became manifest. Feelings on the Rebel side were exacerbated when the top district leader decided to give this post – originally held by a 'Rebel' – to a member of the opposing faction. At this point, the Rebel group insisted on a vote within the Party to resolve the conflict. During the election thus held, a Rebel candidate stood in opposition to the one supported by the district leadership. The identification of factional membership in this district, therefore, has been made on the basis of this subsequent vote for a Z.P. official within the Congress Party.

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then, have been divided into two groups, the criterion for the division being a specific political act.

The model of investigation may be further elucidated if we examine the question underlying the main hypothesis with which my analysis is concerned, namely:

Is the decision taken by a political actor to oppose or to 'rebel' against party authority determined, or could it be predicted, by (a) the characteristics of his socio-economic and political environment; (b) his involvement in the political power structure (another aspect of political behavior); (c) elements of his economic background; (d) the nature of certain emotional commitments and attitudes towards the Congress Party; or, finally, (e) by some particular combination of these factors?*

The answers which are suggested here, and which constitute the essence of this study, are more significant on a practical level than a theoretical one. That is to say, the hypotheses and conclusions developed in the course of this work are directed mainly toward analysis of the political system in an important Indian state. On this level, the significance of the questions raised lies in the implicit challenge which they pose to several hypotheses often advanced or implicitly assumed when Indian politics are discussed or analyzed.

For instance, one of the most frequent, and perhaps least helpful, hypotheses often used to explain Indian politics, is one which implies that the dynamics of political alignments (and almost every other manifestation of political life in India) are to be understood primarily in terms of personal loyalties – sometimes called 'primordial loyalties' – which are guided by feelings of caste solidarity, or community solidarity, or attachments to ascriptive groups, in general. (Such an assertion usually carries with it, explicitly or implicitly, the corollary that such personal loyalties have displaced the commitment to ideology as the basis for action.) This assumption implies that there is a sort of mystical (i.e. irrational) bond between social unit and political action, between leader and follower. Even where the nature of the tie is not so conceived, an explanation of political alignments in terms of personal loyalties is really no explanation at all, but a description at best.

Whether such an assumption about the importance of personal

* The operational definition of categories (a) to (d) will be found in Table C appended to the Note on Methodology (Appendix 1), pp. 215–17. (See also Ch. 3, pp. 47–8, below.)

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loyalties in Indian politics is deduced (by methods known or unknown) or empirically arrived at, it is perhaps more relevant to note that observers of Indian politics – whether journalists or scholars (Indian or foreign) – often do not go beyond this type of ‘explanation’. When they do, it is more often by way of extrapolation from observation which, while it may or may not be exhaustive, is usually not systematic. One is unable, therefore, to gauge the validity of the sources or methods of investigation or the processes of reasoning.¹⁷ One suspects that, for reasons extraneous to the Indian setting, this type of ‘explanation’ is particularly appealing to Westerners.

Another ‘explanation’ of the conflicts besetting the Indian political system suggests that Indian Ministers, whether in the Central Government or in the several state governments, harbor feelings of hostility toward those who hold office in the Congress Party, particularly at higher levels. This animosity is tagged and filed under the ‘ministerial versus organizational faction’ label. It is not usually made clear *why* a minister should be the enemy of some State Congress Committee President, or whether he is so in all circumstances. If so, why? If not, why not? Why do Ministers and State Party leaders, for example, cooperate in some circumstances (as will be indicated in the course of this study)? And if the main conflict is between the ministerial and organizational wings of the party, why are some of the most bitter political struggles fought between Ministers of the same party in the competition for power? The usual answer may be that they are ‘power-hungry’. Again, this explains little, but I will deal with this assertion elsewhere.

Approaches such as these are used to explain Indian politics not only at the national level, but at the state level as well, and in the course of my investigation I often encountered such assumptions in observations made about politics in Maharashtra. It is these with which I attempt to deal.

In addition, more narrowly focussed ‘explanations’ were attempted at the state level, which may have cultural or historical antecedents. One such hypothesis which has currency is that factions, either at the district or at the state level, may be traced to a long-standing conflict between Patils and Deshmukhs.^{*18} One

* These groups have been incorrectly described by some writers as caste groupings. The names ‘Patil’ and ‘Deshmukh’ were actually official titles held by families whose heads were appointed by the British (or by the Moghuls before

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reason suggested for the 'bad blood' between them is the fact that the 'taluka' Deshmukhs, who have lost their prestige and power, are resentful of the 'village' Patils, who have usurped this power and displaced them on the status scale. However, my investigations have shown that this hypothesis does not really hold true in most cases, and that even where such rivalries do exist, they are, at most, merely incidental factors which have temporarily coincided with, or have been enhanced by, a congruence of other events and factors.

In a word, it is rather easy to be misled by the existence of feuds between families, castes or personalities, or between some of the more obvious political or social groups, into believing that alignments abound without rhyme or reason, unconnected and unrelated on the landscape of Indian politics. I hope to offer an alternative, and somewhat more inclusive, explanation concerning the factional behavior of political actors – developed, of course, within the limited scope and area of my study – which suggests that this aspect of Indian political behavior is 'rational', not in the sense that it is consciously reasoned out by the politician at all times (although I do not exclude this possibility), but rather in the sense that it is *predictable* to a certain extent, given a certain configuration of environmental and individual factors (and given a reasonable amount of relevant information about them).

The stresses and strains which underlie the factional conflict investigated are numerous and curiously interwoven. My data indicate that the political behavior which I observed has strong economic roots, and further, that the disease of factionalism – if it be such, rather than a corrective mechanism generated by the system itself – is not due, ultimately, to the lack of commitment to party ideology by party functionaries, as is often claimed, but is generated in part by the party ideology itself, and is nurtured by certain conditions in which the relevant political actors function. Among the elements of the official ideology, it is specifically the

them) as head of a village (in the case of the Patil), or of an area roughly equivalent to the taluka (in the case of the Deshmukh), and entrusted either with maintaining law and order or with collecting land revenue, or with both; thus, one may have been a Police Patil or a Revenue Patil or may have combined both functions. In the latter instance, a man might 'bequeath' the 'Patilships' separately to two sons. It is because of this, in part, and also because villages (on which Patils are based) are more numerous than talukas, that Patils today outnumber Deshmukhs. (The generic term for such titles is 'gharana'.)

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economic philosophy of the 'mixed enterprise' which has produced a mixed or mixed-up political enterprise within the Congress Party organization itself. This ambiguity toward public and private economic activity in the party ideology, reflected in the juxtaposition of incompatible economic practices and interests, is, by extension, carried into the political behavior of Congressmen. The result is factionalism.

It may well be pointed out that this is not a new finding. The fact that there exists a 'right' and a 'left' wing in the Congress organization has been common knowledge for a long time. What is proposed here is the following:

Firstly, that, in the State of Maharashtra at least, this schism underlies some of the other conflict situations which are perceived by so many observers as distinct and isolated phenomena. A hypothesis such as I propose might place in better perspective some of the phenomena which often are seen as the precipitants of political factionalism.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this 'right'/'left' split is observed not only, as is usually assumed, among national and state leaders, the political sophisticates, or the more knowledgeable political actors in the large urban areas. It is also a basic division reaching down to the level of local politics in the rural areas, that is, the district level and perhaps below, precisely the levels often characterized as almost exclusively concerned with personalities, caste, and so forth.

Let me repeat that the rationality of Indian politics is not conceived exclusively in terms of predictability. In other words, I do not wish to imply by my emphasis on 'predictability' that the element of conscious reasoning is entirely lacking in Indian political behavior. What I do wish to suggest is that this element may be more prevalent in one segment of the political elite than in another. It is therefore desirable to distinguish between two levels of political actor and two levels of awareness in analyzing the dynamics of factional alignment.

At one level, there are the political leaders and the protagonists in the factional struggle. At the other level, there are the supporters or followers of political leaders. The relationship between the two is a hierarchical one, as the term 'level' indicates. These two kinds of political actor, then, are motivated by somewhat different ambitions for political office. Two basic kinds of political ambition (often