

INDIAN ELECTORATE IN SEARCH OF A GOVERNMENT

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Politics in India is governed by a few fundamental rules that determine the functioning of its political parties and the process of their strategy formulation. Together, these rules comprise:

The Operating Principles of Indian Politics:

1 Role of the Party Leader:

1.1 It is the bounden duty of a Party Leader to attain power 'by whatever means necessary'. Once in power, it is his/ her bounden duty to stay in power.

1.2 To fulfil this duty, the key task before a Party Leader is to ensure that the party flock stays together.

An approved technique for achieving this goal is to provide as many of the party members a seat in the cabinet as possible. Those others, who cannot be accommodated in the Cabinet, must be provided plum posts, preferably of the cabinet rank or at least the ones that provide equal perks and opportunities.

1.3 Since many members are still likely to desert the party in search of greener pastures, it is advisable to start collating information that serves as leverage against drift. In this task, co-operation of various official agencies, particularly those engaged in information gathering, monitoring, revenue collection or peace keeping is advisable.

1.4 As this co-operation assumes a somewhat longer stay in office and is also somewhat complex to obtain, a supplementary strategy of keeping the second and third rung party leadership on wobbly ground through dissent, antagonism, internal insurgency and conflicts is essential.

1.5 The key task of government at this juncture shall be window-dressing and to ensure incumbent survival. A simultaneous task of the government shall be to ensure sufficient supply of tangible and intangible resource for the next round of elections.

1.6 An un-stated task of the party leader shall be to ensure a healthy growth of the individual and collective treasury, both in size and in diversity. It is mandatory that the Chief keeps the keys to the party treasury unless willing to risk internal destabilisation and insurgency.

1.7 For role of the Party Leader when not in power, see 'Role of the Opposition'.

2 Role of the Party Legislators:

2.1 It shall be the bounden duty of the party legislators to seek a perennial change of their leader. This is applicable to the ordinary members, the key positions' holders in the government and in the party and the second in command.

2.2 For achieving this goal, help from other political parties, including from the most ardent opponents of ones own ideology, can be actively sought, bought or otherwise obtained. Particularly useful in this regard will be those who have no accountability to the system due to their small numbers, single member status or a general lack of conviction.

2.3 The party members shall continually experiment with various permutations and combinations with full faith that party affiliations are in a state of permanent flux. This process shall include carving out new parties out of the existing or non-existing, and merging of two or more parties or their segments. In making these combinations, all promises that fulfil 'the aspirations of people' shall be made.

2.4 When occasionally in the Parliament, legislators shall undertake sit-in dharnas, noisy demonstrations and ensure general disruptions. Use of physical force, inside the legislature, is generally discouraged though not proscribed.

3 Role of the Ordinary Members:

3.1 It shall be the bounden duty of all ordinary members of a political party to swarm in large numbers to publicly organised party events.

This shall include witnessing party leaders undertake Pad-yatra, Rath yatra, Dandi yatra, Rail yatra, Helicopter-cum-Satellite yatra and any other yatra that the party may design in the upliftment of people and the economic development of the nation.

3.2 During election times, members shall wait by the roadside for long hours to see their party leaders whiz past in great speed.

3.3 They will also be expected to assemble in large numbers in public meetings to hear their party leaders repeat the issues that they have repeated

ad-nauseum over the past decades. The party shall make all arrangements of food and transport and may reimburse out-of-pocket expenses.

4 Role of the Party Goon Brigade:

4.1 It shall be the bounden duty of the Party Goon Brigade to create disorder, coerce innocent bystanders and intimidate general citizens.

4.2 Depending on the region, tools and equipment allowed for this exercise shall vary from raw physical strength to long wooden lathis, knives, swords, nailed gloves and other weapons that can inflict grievous injury.

4.3 For undertaking this onerous duty, members of the Goon Brigade shall be entitled to enter all premises, private or personal, including, though not limiting to homes, educational institutions, places of business, trade or worship. Brigade members will be assured that the peace keeping agencies shall not intervene until 'project' objectives have been fulfilled.

5 Role of the Opposition:

5.1 It is the bounden duty of the opposition to topple a government.

For fulfilment of this objective active help may be sought of all legislators of the ruling party including all members of the cabinet other than the leader. Further, all means shall be considered fair, including giving away the head position of government or providing support from outside the government. In pursuit of this goal all novel and creative interpretations of law, preferably with the help of the legislative and/ or the state head, and achieving new heights of public morality will be honoured.

5.2 The normal stipulated time for support to a new government shall be one day. When the legislature is not in session, this period may be extended till the beginning of next session. No interim peace shall, however, be assured.

5.3 Collective invocation of God in exotic locations shall be the major mode of decision making for creation of new alliances. Groups that cut across party lines will generally be favoured as they also help in the task of national integration.

5.4 Pursuit of this objective however, shall be carried out within the constitutional framework while simultaneously providing a constructive and responsible opposition in and outside the legislature. This shall include active opposition to All Programs and Policies, including those initiated by the party while in power.

5.5 The basic tenet of responsible opposition shall be: Oppose. Period.

6 Role of the Single Representatives / Independent Legislators:

6.1 It shall be the bounden duty of each single legislative representative of a party and each independent member, to stake claim to the highest Executive post. Single minded devotion to the goal and the highest machiavillian skills shall be the two basic requirement for achieving this goal.

6.2 When achieved even for one hour, it will automatically provide pure Nirvana apart from a place in the history, last rites with full state honours, a house converted in to a Permanent Museum - cum - Residence for the 'family' member, and a variety of other honours that go with the selfless service to nation.

7 Party Membership:

7.1 General membership of the party is not necessary. It shall, however, be necessary to have names in the Membership Register.

7.2 Active membership shall be generally discouraged to keep out undesirable elements. Those others, still keen to affiliate with the party, may cultivate one of the leaders. Category of membership granted will depend on standing of the cultivated leader in the party.

7.3 Others may join through the Goon Brigade or as Cheer Leaders in a public events. For the rest, membership is by invitation.

8 Strategy for Winning :

8.1 The key strategy for winning an election shall be to create a short-lived issue to sway prevailing electoral sentiments.

The approved list of such issues includes: Caste, Religion, including Secularism, a god-sent Price Rise of a Basic Commodity, a fleeting atmosphere of Petty or Serious Crime, a neighbourly gift of National Insecurity etc. Innovation is advised in the effective use of these issues.

8.2 Manifestos, needed primarily for ceremonial use and media coverage, shall be nicely bound.

8.3 Electoral Alliances with small, unknown, widely dispersed and ideologically diverse parties shall be given preference over the allegedly principled alliances.

8.4 Attention for attack shall primarily be focused on personalities.

9 Choice of Candidates for Elections:

9.1 Prior to choosing a candidate, an analysis of electoral composition of a constituency is mandatory.

9.2 Following shall be the descending order of priorities in making a choice.

- a. The sitting member.
- b. A member of the nuclear family of a sitting member.
- c. A member of the extended family.
- d. A person belonging to the dominant caste or community.
- e. A person capable of 'influencing' the outcome.

The above prescribed set of priorities shall be adhered to under all circumstances.

9.3 Care shall be taken to ensure "noticeable" presence of vulnerable segments of society, notably women and minorities. Token presence of a film star, a sports-person, a media-person and a social cause champion shall adequately represent the intellectual capital of the nation.

10 The Vote Tactics:

10.1 The choice of voting day tactics shall be in consonance with the culture and location of a constituency.

Good tactics shall include, but not be limited to: deletion of a large set of names from electoral rolls, advise to law abiding citizens to stay away from polling, creation of no-man's zone around a polling booth and locking of voters inside their apartment buildings. Additional tactics may be considered for use in more 'sensitive' constituencies with uncertainty of outcome.

11 Message for the Masses:

Once in power, the following shall comprise full and final explanation for the state of the nation:

'A general deterioration in the moral fibre of society'

'Something embedded in our national culture'

'All gains of development negated by population increase'

'A global phenomenon'.

'A historic reality'

'People get the government that they deserve'

12 Role of the Media:

12.1 Media shall be responsible for reporting the original behaviour of 'chosen' few.

12.2 Occasionally, media shall provoke implementation of the Operating Principles by providing lubricants to the political machinery.

13 Role of the Citizens:

13.1 The rest of citizens interested in the state affairs may continue to exercise their freedom of expression in coffee houses, train journeys, among gathering of friends and any of the many fora allowed under the constitution.

13.2 At the end of the day, each one may go home bravely supporting the life style of the privileged few. Until the next election.

The Emerging Scenario:

The above principles, when implemented, provide a neat array of outcomes which can be summed up as under:

- Elections over, a group of parties and their leaders will take over the reins of the government, wrangling at each step for the spoils of power.
- The Party, Legislature and the Cabinet will continue to be a closed family affair.
- Leadership issue will continue to be opened each evening before going to bed.
- Stability of the government will be a short-duration pact renewable each morning.
- Economic development and national growth shall be a 'residual agenda'.
- Quality of life of ordinary citizens shall be a non-concern of the government.

Vote '98:

Were a proof necessary about the veracity of the Operating Principles and their outcome, it was provided by the results of 1998 elections and the subsequent formation and fall of the government is a copy book replica.

Prima facie, for the second time in two years, the Indian electorate refused to give a clear mandate to any single party or alliance to rule the country. This has baffled most political observers and phrases like: 'a fractured mandate', 'a push towards large, messy and multiple alliances' etc. have been commonly used. Some commentators suggested that the electorate was confused. Others felt that there was no message in the mandate. Interestingly, the bafflement was not confined only to the political analysts. It equally confounded the political bosses who talked simultaneously in terms of 'one more election' and 'the same outcome again'. Their comments have been varied but the underlying theme has been the same, that the electorate has not played fair. Strangely, nobody asked if the parties and their representatives had played fair to the electorate.

Notwithstanding the bafflement, it must be remembered that, not too long ago these political sages had proclaimed the very same electorate to be most intelligent and discriminating, despite being illiterate. After all, the electorate had, in one swift move, removed Indira Gandhi and her entire cabinet, removed the Janata Dal government 'that did not work' and reinstalled Indira Gandhi in full glory barely two odd years later. It similarly reposed total confidence in her son and then withdrew it unceremoniously. And finally in 1998 it has given a virtual veto power to every single elected legislator to pull down any government that may be formed. The last act by a voter turnout 4% higher than in 1996 and in an election that "nobody wanted". In the process, by electing a Lok Sabha in which any government that is formed will rest on a shifting centre of gravity, the electorate has pulled the rug from under the political bosses of Indian democracy. So what has the electorate been up to?

Confronted with a limited task of putting a stamp on a symbol, the electorate did the best it could by expressing its unhappiness with all the parties and the existing political process. Thus, there is no party or combination that can say with good conscience that it came out as a winner in the elections of 1998. Vote '98 therefore, is the singular success of the electorate over the Election Designers and Government Architects. By electing a parliament that it did, the electorate has outsmarted the smart politicians and has conveyed as clearly as it could that the crux of the issue is governance, not politicking. The surprise is that the outcome of 1998 elections has come as a surprise. For when trends over time are observed, it is obvious that for a long time the Indian electorate has been in search of a good government.

The Electoral Footprints over Time:

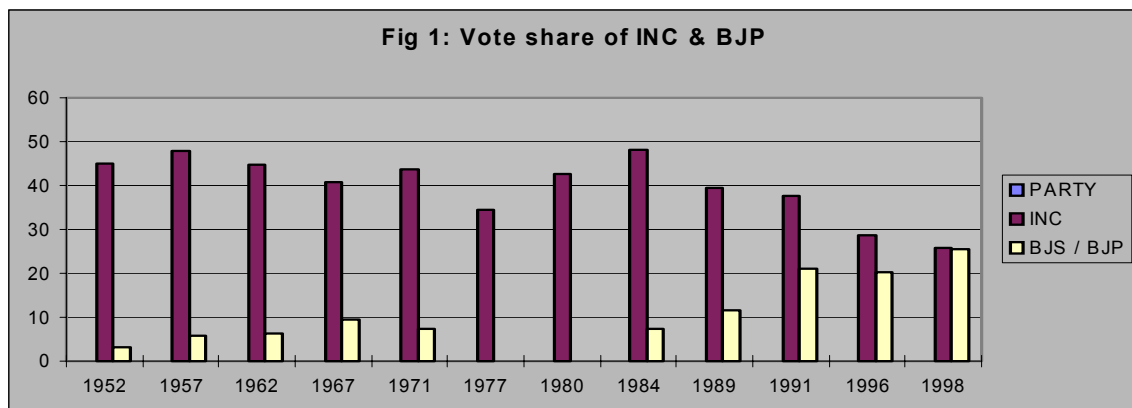
Let us briefly look at the electoral outcomes over time.

The Initial Challenge: The initial overwhelming wins for Indian National Congress with a vote share ranging from 40.8% to 47.8% in the first five general elections can be termed as a carry forward of the freedom victory bonhomie. There is

nothing unusual about this outcome as reaping fruits of freedom struggle is a story repeated world over.

Associated with these wins however, was a socialist-leftist challenge. In 1952 it was Socialist Party (SOC) and Praja Socialist Party (PSP) with 10.6 and 5.8% votes respectively. In 1957 it was PSP and Communist Party of India (CPI) with 10.4% and 8.9% vote share and during 1962 it was CPI with 9.9% vote along with PSP with 6.8% and SOC with 2.7%. Subsequently, the lead was taken over by the CPI and CPM though not necessarily to gain the 2nd position. Other parties have emerged with a similar ideological bent but have also remained confined to one or two states. It may be noted that the combined Socialist-Communist challenge peaked around 20% vote share in the initial three general elections and has reduced to around 7-8% as a communist challenge. Thus the initial socialist-communist challenge never became national and has subsequently been reduced to the state levels. Nevertheless, this challenge will continue to occupy a significant space in the electoral arena and a strong national voice unless the issue of equality of opportunity is adequately addressed.

The Major Challenge: The 1962 election saw for the first time emergence of a rightist challenge with Swatantra Party occupying the 3rd place behind CPI with 7.9% vote share and Bhartiya Jana Sangha with a 6.4% vote share. This development was further confirmed in the 1967 elections with Bhartiya Jana Sangha emerging at the second place with 9.4% vote share followed by the Swatantra with 8.7% votes. While the Swatantra party did not last long, 1977 general election saw BJS also merge with the newly formed Janata Party along with several others to pose a collective challenge to the INC. Although the JP experiment did not last beyond 1980 general elections, the BJS challenge to



Congress re-emerged picking up from where it had left and began eroding the centre space occupied by the Congress. This challenge has grown stronger with each successive election and has finally come neck to neck with a vote share of 25.47% as against 25.88% of the Congress.

Today, in its new cast, the Bhartiya Janata Party is a clear alternative to the Congress in the centre space of Indian Politics. Interestingly, together these two national level parties have obtained a vote share between 50-55% in all elections since 1984.

The Regional Challenge: Of the eight currently listed as National Parties with the Election Commission, barring INC and BJP, all others have a small vote share that ranges between 1.75 to 5.16%. Further none of these 'national parties' have a base beyond one or two states and in effect are akin to the other regional parties.

A significant trend and one that has been rather de-emphasized by the Political Analysts is the strong Regional Party vote share in the general elections. The presence of regional parties was noticeable even during the heydays of post freedom democracy. In the very first Lok Sabha the State Parties had a national vote share of 8.9%. These parties represented states as wide spread as Pepsu (34.5%), Hyderabad (32.0%), Madhya Bharat (34.5%) and Orissa (26.2%). Other states that had more than 10% votes for a regional party included Bihar, Punjab, Madras, Rajasthan, Travancore-Cochin and Manipur.

This regional political pull abated only slightly during 1957 elections and saw a resurgence in 1962 with Madras state party share going up to 18.6% of the votes. In 1967 elections Goa, Jammu & Kashmir and Pondicherry also joined the band wagon with a high vote share for the regional parties. 1971 saw regional parties assert themselves in Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Haryana and Nagaland. By 1984 general elections the phenomenon of regional parties was fully confirmed with Telgu Desam holding sway in Andhra Pradesh. If still there was any doubt, the 1996 and 1998 elections have proved beyond doubt that Regional Party share in the composition of national parliament is here to stay.

The recognized state parties, together with the other registered, though unrecognized, but also regional, parties continue to account for close to 25% share of the total national vote in the parliamentary elections. In 1996 elections it was 21.34% for the Recognized State Parties and 3.29% for the unrecognized parties and changed to 18.79% and 10.8% respectively during 1998 general elections.

Today at least one strong regional party is in existence in every state outside the historical central India. It would, therefore, be impossible to wish away, for example, SAD, AGP, TDP or DMK in any parliamentary elections. Yet none of these regional parties, including the assembled Third Front, will ever be able to form a government at the centre.

The trend over time shows a converging share of the two major national parties, a small and declining share of all other national parties a stable share of the regional parties, and a declining share of independents.

What the Trends Say

Based on the above, one can conclude that currently three forces, two centrists and one regional, jointly occupy major space in the Indian electoral arena. The rest is occupied by small unrecognized parties and independents, all with a local appeal. A small chunk is also occupied by the communist parties but that is also primarily a part of the regional challenge even though their ideological base is not local. Going by their limited vote share over successive elections, it seems unlikely that the Communist parties can offer a national alternative in the foreseeable future.

Thus, overall, one can venture to say that the electorate, by successively voting for promising alternatives and eliminating non-starters, has taken the cleansing process as far as it possibly could. In the process, it has successively narrowed the choices for government formation. Future elections may alter a few numbers here or there, but they are unlikely to yield a clear one party rule or even a simple manageable coalition of a few compatible partners. Thus we are face to face with a situation wherein neither of the two major parties by themselves alone, nor an assembled Third Front, nor the regional parties jointly will be able to form a government. This brings up the issue of the role of the states and regions in the central government.

In a way it is this problem which the electorate has brought to the fore with its unique denial of mandate to each party and simultaneously empowering each with a veto power.

Thus, given the present Indian political scenario, the country is unlikely to achieve a classic two party democracy as symbolized by the US and UK and as dreamt of at the time of framing the constitution. This is likely to be so despite the Unitary constitution imposed on an otherwise Federal State and despite the most ardent wishes of the players and well-wishers of Indian democracy.

The Road Ahead

The behaviour pattern of political players in Indian democracy, as enshrined in the Operating Principles, has highlighted a major lacuna in our present democratic system: the inability of the present system to provide a stable platform to the Prime Minister and his cabinet. Simultaneously, the electoral vote pattern has highlighted the federal character of the country thereby lending further edge to this instability. Is there a solution to the problems arising out of the interplay of central and regional forces, the infirm platform and the political choice process?

Let us briefly look at the two issues.

Need for a Stable Platform

The inability of our present democratic system to provide a stable platform to run the government arises primarily from the constitutional lacuna that Executive is by definition a part of the legislature (Singh, 1997). This has confounded the issue of government formation with that of legislative work and has been exploited to the core by our political players. As a result both government and legislative work have suffered. Unless addressed, it is likely to dog our democracy in future. The paramount need, therefore, is to delink the politics of government formation from the legislative work and letting the Prime Minister and his Cabinet operate from a stable platform.

What constitute a stable platform? At the very least it means that the executive is not dependent on the legislature for its day to day survival. It also means a fixed tenure. Finally, it means giving the Prime Minister a free hand in the choice of his cabinet.

One way to provide for this stability is through a switch over to the Presidential form of government, a suggestion that has been repeatedly made. An alternative way is to make the necessary minimum adjustments in the present system and provide for a different electoral base for the Prime Minister without disturbing other provisions of the constitution. This would mean exploring a different electoral basis for the choice of Prime Minister than the current 545 under the constitution. One can examine several alternatives, using differing criteria and varying anywhere between the present 545 to the total electorate of 60 plus crores in our search for a good solution.

Several benefits become obvious with delinking of legislature from executive. It allows legislature to focus on the task of legislation and Executive on the task of day to day governance. It brings greater transparency in the choice of Prime Minister by replacing the current back-room process. It also obviates the need for all make-shift alliances.

The difference between the 'the need to create a stable platform' versus the 'presidential system' is the difference between the focus on a problem and a solution. A dispassionate debate on the problem is more likely to bring about a lasting solution than a focus on any single solution. Unfortunately in political debate issues get clouded by the current political needs of the players, generally to the exclusion of problems and their solution.

It may be noted here that arising out of the present system most PMs' the Country has had till date were a back-room decision. Jawahar Lal Nehru was chosen by Mahatma Gandhi over Sardar Patel, who by most accounts was the choice of the Congress CWC. Mrs. Gandhi was chosen as a docile candidate over an upright Morarji Desai. Rajiv benefited from the heredity and the circumstances. Morarji, when he eventually became the PM, was a choice arising

out of the conflicting pulls and pressures as was Narasimha Rao. Several Prime Ministers, including Charan Singh, Chandrashekhar, Deve Gowda and IK Gujral were the choice influenced by a party not participating in the government. The irony is that in most cases, the mantle of Prime Minister could have fallen on any one else. Equally important, support from most of them could have been withdrawn at a day's notice, as was done in several cases.

The present choice process does not require from an individual a clear statement of the policies and programs he/she wishes to follow, if elected. Not even a statement of intent. Nor does it give the electorate an opportunity to examine his track record before voting. It does not even require an honest statement that he/she aspires to the highest office of authority. On the contrary, such a statement is an almost sure route to disqualification. Instead, the system allows every single legislator, with or without national base to aspire for the highest office.

Once the selection system is transparent, whether the person who stands on it is tall or small becomes immaterial. A transparent system gives an opportunity to all those who aspire to hold the highest office to say so honestly and unambiguously and share their vision of the future of the nation. It also ensures that one does not have to mortgage conscience in the run up to the platform.

Need for Recognition of the Federal Character of State

The issue of unitary government imposed on an otherwise federal state has also been highlighted often by the political analysts. The various parties' and their combinations' vote share in the successive general elections validates this assertion. Once again, the issue can be addressed through a range of solutions of which the federal form of government is just one.

A simple solution to resolve this issue would be to have ideologically based alliances between a central party and regional parties. Assuming that regional parties are governed by ideology, one finds that neither of the two central parties, the INC and the BJP, have made any attempt in this direction in their alliances. The reason perhaps lies in their cherished desire to form a single party government as happened in the initial elections. That this is unlikely to happen any more is something not acceptable as yet.

But assuming that desire for ideological alliances exists, it must be remembered that ideology is mercurial in the hands of a politician and most ideology based alliances tend to break up under exacting circumstances. If one thing is known about our democracy, it is that demanding circumstances exist. Thus an enduring alternative for un-impaired governance of the country will still be required.

An enduring solution will be to make alternations in the constitution that brings us closer to the reality of a federal nation. In its simplest form it will require greater

autonomy and decentralisation of powers, including financial, and a re-allocation of subjects between the centre and the states. This will mean limiting the role of central government to the issues that are clearly national and thereby creating a sort of a United Europe that EC countries are now trying to achieve.

An alternative solution, the one that reflects the other end of the scale, is to create a federal structure for our democracy. Historically, all successful empires in India have had a strong centre. But they have also always been accompanied by small but strong regional commands. This makes sense for a country of the size of a continent. To examine such an alternative, leave alone accept it, will require a will and maturity that may be somewhat scarce. But looked at whichever way, the issue of federal character and a unitary state demands a constitutional review.

The Constitutional Review

Votaries of the status quo of the present system say that we have had almost 50 years of stability under the present constitution. Perhaps true. Perhaps also true that the so called stability was nothing more than the not-so-still waters hiding the turbulence underneath. If one can consider 78 constitutional amendments and 100 odd constitutional crises in 50 years as still waters, then perhaps even still waters need to be looked at closely.

Interestingly, even those opposed to the proposed constitutional review agree that some change in the system is required. The only issue is whether this is done piecemeal or in one big move. No doubt overall review generates pressure for more changes than one may be willing to bargain. Whether in bits or chunks, a constitutional review for strengthening our democracy appears imperative.

Any hope that the electoral cleansing process will bring the country back to the much sought for two-party system is unlikely to fructify. Electorate has brought the country as close to a two-party system as possible in a federal situation and it is time that we shed the insecurity rooted in the birth of the nation.

Presently, we are at the evolutionary stage of democracy that is somewhat akin to the Fourth French Republic, with a new Prime Minister in the morning and in the afternoon. This is coupled with a political process that is akin to the US democracy in the 1880's with its see through ballot boxes to ensure that bought votes stayed bought. The choice is whether a constitutional review is an opportunity to fine-tune the system or is it a juncture to examine alternatives in Democracy.

The course chartered by the Indian democracy has been quite steadfast and comparable with the one chartered by some of present day mature democracies during their growth phase. Yet, a time comes when one must face the issues and rectify the basic flaw in a system. That time appears to have come.

Reference:

Singh, JP., 'Fifty Years of Democracy in India: An Overview', Liberal Times, Vol.V,2, 1997, p.19-26.