



POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT:

The dynamics of party politics of contemporary times is completely different from its preceding phases. Numerous factors can be identified to be contributing towards this success, the presence of vibrant political parties being one of them. As parties exist to support and sustain democracy, a brief analysis of the contribution of parties in India in this regard seems necessary. Political parties do have their own organisational life, but they are also nested in party systems. They are components or 'parts' of the system, and therefore, changes in the system naturally have repercussions on the parts. Understand the nature of the party system in India and Identify its various characteristics; Analyse the changing nature of the party system and explain the emerging patterns; and Discuss the socio-economic and the political factors underlying the changing nature of party politics.

KEYWORDS: Party, Ideology, Socio-Economic, Electoral dominance, Coalition Government, Centre and State, Democracy, Social Justice and voting

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of party politics of contemporary times is completely different from its preceding phases. As Ajay K Mehra aptly remarks, the emergence of the BJP has not only created the basis for bi-nodal party politics in India in the near future, since the third front remains in total disarray, it has also paved the way for coalition politics based on a federalized party structure with participation from national and regional parties alike (Mehra, 2003: 22) The Indian democracy offers a unique political experience. Most characteristic prerequisites of functional electoral democracy that were perceived as mandatory have been absent here. Yet the system has survived rather successfully. Numerous factors can be identified to be contributing towards this success, the presence of vibrant political parties being one of them. As parties exist to support and sustain democracy, a brief analysis of the contribution of parties in India in this regard seems necessary. Till date, India is nothing less than an enigma for western scholars, especially for the likes of Seymour Martin Lipset and others who perceived prosperity as the precondition of democracy. This inclination is typically reflected by most of scholars having allegiance to the school of political modernization and development who construed industrialization as the sine-qua-none of democratic politics. Their correlation might be validated by case studies of other post-colonial societies, but India definitely stands out in this matter.

It is common knowledge that Indian democracy is undergoing a fundamental transformation. This has been marked by several changes including systemic ones in the nature of electoral

competition, a multi-fold increase in the size of the middle class, penetration of social media, and the withering away of old hierarchies, amongst others. The social and geographical expansion of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014, has altered the political landscape resulting in further marginalisation of the Congress, the decimation of the Left Front, and the decline in the strength of state-level parties. The BJP has made significant gains across the board, which has lessened the differences between various voting blocs curated in the past along with other social cleavages. Similarly, state-level specificities that dominated the discourse in the previous two decades, now have somewhat diminished status in electoral analyses, especially to understand the contours of national politics.

OBJECTIVES:

The present study deals with the nature of the party system in India. It aims at familiarizing the scholars of Indian Politics with the fundamental features underlying the evolution of the party system in the post-independence period. Understand the nature of the party system in India and Identify its various characteristics; Analyse the changing nature of the party system and explain the emerging patterns; and Discuss the socio-economic and the political factors underlying the changing nature of party politics.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM IN INDIA

Political parties do have their own organisational life, but they are also nested in party systems. They are components or 'parts' of the system, and therefore, changes in the system naturally have repercussions on the parts. It is agreed that the party system in India has seen at least four transformations since the very inception. In the first-party system (1952-67), the Congress was the predominant party winning both at the national level and in most states, overshadowing other parties, thus famously described as the 'Congress system'. The next phase was marked by the emergence of Opposition against the Congress party in several states, resulting in the polarisation of state party systems (1967-89). While the Congress continued to win nationally, the non-Congress opposition parties started winning larger proportion of seat and vote shares. The third phase marked the beginning of the post-Congress polity—a competitive multi-party system (1989-2014) in which the Congress was no longer the dominant player nationally. The period witnessed the formation of coalition governments at the national level since no party could get a majority on its own. State-based parties acquired a greater voice both in the states and at the national level in this phase. The current party system began with the formation of a single-party majority of the BJP in 2014. With a consecutive victory in 2019 and the party's increasing presence, it was clear that India has entered in its second-dominant party system phase anchored around the BJP. The median seems to have shifted so far towards the right that even the Opposition is either mute or coloured in strategy and tactics.

Parties and democratic deepening

How must one understand the emerging contradictions in our polity: a robust competitive polity with state-level parties winning important assembly elections and active citizenry protesting on the streets, along with an ideological hegemony of the BJP? And, how should we explain the paradox that on one hand most political parties in India are decaying as organisations and showing centralising tendencies, yet playing crucial role in producing democratic outcomes such as representation of marginalised groups? That the Indian democracy is *sui generis*. It is as much a by-product of institutional design as it is an accidental outcome of contradictory forces rooted in society. India's political parties act as platform for these societal forces, with a modest record—succeeding in some arenas while failing in others. Their agility and adaptability have kept everyday politics energised. The routinisation of politics and entrepreneurial spirit of India's politicians will act as a safety valve against any form of political culture acquiring hegemonic status. Furthermore, the civilizational diversity of India means that no electoral majority is cast in stone and no ideological hegemony can enjoy permanence. The

continuous churn in India's diverse set-up will continue to produce opposing tendencies and ensure the democratic balance of our system.

Changed Socio-Economic Profile: Dislocation of Political Centre:

Change in the nature of the party system in the decades after 1960s, according to Rajini Kothari, was the consequence of the 'changed socio-economic and demographic profile of the polity.' Such a change in the profile of the polity was a consequence of the political mobilisation of the masses as well as the emergence of new political classes. The political mobilization of the masses was a logical consequence of the electoral politics based upon the principle of universal adult franchise. Frequently held elections helped in increasing the political consciousness of mass of Indians, especially those belonging to the backward and lower castes. The emergence of the new political classes was directly related to the rise of the proprietary peasant class in rural India in the backdrop of the land reforms. By the beginning of the seventies, the land-owning socially dominant sections belonging mainly to the backward castes had attained sufficient economic strength to demand a share in political power. The entry of these castes into the competitive power politics had far reaching consequences for the Indian politics. Firstly, there was an increase in the number of those aspiring for a share in power. The dominance of the traditional political elite, therefore, was seriously challenged. Secondly, there was also greater manifestation of a variety of conflicting interests. These new entrants did not share the political blues of the traditional elite. They had not only different demands and different expectations from the political system but they also used a different political language. This had the effect of posing a serious threat to the consensual politics of traditional political elite in general and that of the congress, in particular. Unable to integrate and balance varied interests, the congress was dislocated from its position of centrality. The changed context of the politics was also the result of the assertion of the lower casts. In the politics of numbers, the lower castes and Dalits were brought into politics, initially, in the context of the patron-client relationship. As clients of the locally dominant.

Seen from this perspective, there is a greater federalised context of party system.

This federalized context has been provided by the complex relation between the national and the regional party system and signifies assertion of the regional parties, on the other. In the past two decades, a number of regional parties with their focus on regional demands have emerged. These regional parties, besides occupying significant political space at the state level are also playing crucial role in the central politics. It is due to their active presence at the national level of politics, that the party system is really acquiring a federal character. As the national parties are dependent upon the regional parties for the formation of government, the latter have increased their bargaining power. With the result, there has been mainstreaming of regional parties. The distinction that existed earlier between the regional and the national party has also been blurred. The National parties have become regional in character and the regional parties are increasingly participatory in national politics and thereby acquiring national stature. The Congress and the BJP, the two national parties, for a long time now, have 'regional' rather than 'national' sphere of influence.

The challenges of citizen engagement:

Party membership numbers reflect how citizens relate to traditional party politics. Overall, party membership has declined since 1994 in Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America, and in Africa since 2005. In contrast, in the Middle East and Iran, and North America, party membership appears to be on the rise (see Figure 4.3). In the period 2010–14, party membership was at around 14 per cent globally, only one-third of which was active (UN 2016). Political party membership in 27 countries of Europe, the birthplace of some of the oldest parties in the world, was 4.7 per cent on average by the end of the 2000s (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012), and fell to 2.4 per cent during 2010–14 (UN 2016: 70).

Resilient party responses Parties are considered an appropriate conduit to fulfil four main functions of representation:

aggregating societal interests into policy agendas, mobilizing citizens around those platforms, recruiting leaders to advance the party's agenda and forming governments to implement them. While these functions remain essential, both established and thirdwave democracies strive to overcome the challenges of representation by upgrading the infrastructures that parties offer to citizens. This section explores party responses that help democracy become more resilient and able to adapt to new challenges of representation.

Credible political actions:

addressing the real issues Political parties play an important role in a democratic system. It is important to distinguish between the parties themselves and the party system: parties sometimes disappear as a natural part of democratic evolution, generally because they have become ideologically irrelevant or are unable to respond to a significant challenge. New parties usually step in to take their place, which keeps the overall system of political parties resilient.

Addressing policy challenges without compromising ideology:

Populist parties thrive in policy vacuums, when traditional parties allow them to offer one-sided (populist) narratives. By engaging with citizens, traditional parties can disrupt the vacuum and offer compelling policy alternatives. As an example of a policy vacuum, Syrian refugees featured prominently in Slovakia's 2016 elections, even though the country only had 330 asylum applicants in 2015 (Eurostat)—considerably fewer than other EU countries. Some established political parties are adopting the traits and practices of their successful populist rivals. Traditional parties are most effective when they can combine their strengths to formulate public policies and recruit new political leaders with the capacity to mobilize citizens and articulate their interests in clear-cut and bold terms.

Restoring trust:

Political parties are better able to retain citizen trust by presenting citizens with a comprehensive integrity agenda. Focusing only on the funding of political parties and campaign finance has failed to protect politics from corruption due to the complex networks and roles of money in politics (OECD 2016). Holistic, integrity-enhanced systems—that coordinate frameworks across different policy areas such as procurement, conflict of interest and party finance—increase resilience, which protects public policies and the state from narrow economic interests. Trustworthy leaders can demonstrate a clean track record and credibly commit to implementing integrity-oriented rules and practices that apply within their parties and in government. By doing so, they deter misconduct in public office and the influence of narrow economic interests over policy. When high-profile scandals emerge, political parties face pressure to tackle corruption.

Democratizing decision-making:

Political parties in both established and emerging democracies are adopting new technologies to reach out to members and non-members for help in undertaking traditional party tasks such as online policy formulation, voting and fundraising (see International IDEA's Digital Parties Portal). Democracy software such as Agora Voting or DemocracyOS allows large groups of citizens to table proposals, and discuss and vote on them online. The 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns (as well as the 2016 US presidential campaigns) successfully used big data campaigning, which allowed them to better target potential voters and win swing states. Political parties in India and Spain have introduced software to make their donations visible online in real time and thus win voters' trust. Meetup has become a common instrument for parties in Italy and the Netherlands to bring citizens together for small, and sometimes larger, informal gatherings and debates. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and personal blogs have become a mainstay of any politician seeking

interaction with constituents. Politicians are increasingly realizing that technology is a two-way street: it should not only 'mobilize the masses' but also allow the masses to 'mobilize politics'

CONCLUSION:

The politics of alliance has led to the polarisation of parties. In the initial years, such polarisation took the shape of three alliance structures. Political parties, in the period after 1989 seemed to be organizing themselves around three poles, the one led by the Congress, the second led by the BJP and the Third, which was termed as the Third Front/United Front. The third pole was later weakened. Comprising of the Janata Dal, the TelguDesam, the Left Parties and many other regional and state parties, it had been successful in forming the government in 1989 but it could not sustain either its unity or its political strength for long time. fragmented and its number in the Parliament was substantially reduced. Many of the parties representing the Third Front regrouped around the Congress or the BJP. The way alliances have been formed in last few Parliamentary elections, there has emerged a bi-polarity. The Congress and the BJP are the two parties around which varied political parties have been grouped in recent elections.

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