



A STUDY ON BIRTH AND EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEM IN INDIA (1947-2019)

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ABSTRACT :

The history of Indian politics can be traced back to the pre-independence era with the independence movement of India against the British rule, the gradual expansion of voting rights beginning in the early 20th century to the inclusion of universal suffrage for adults under India's Constitution since 1950. If the spread of democracy is the most important explanatory variable for the existing party system, then the parliamentary-federal Constitution under which India's democracy has been operating for the last seven decades, regional and multicultural diversity of India's population, are the intermediate or mediating variables responsible for shaping its patterns and trends. So, the patterns and tendencies that have developed over the years inside the Indian party system have served as a filter through which the primary effects of democratic mobilization have been channeled. India's political past, cultural diversity, and Constitution all have contributed to the democratic mobilization and shaped the country's party structure. The development of political parties in India is the focus of this study.



KEYWORDS: Birth, Evolution, Party System, Political Parties, Elections, Federal, India.

INTRODUCTION

The Cemeteries of the past have often dominated the birth and evolution of political parties. Democratic politics is also necessary for political parties. Clubs serve as a constant connection between universal suffrage and the legislative power, which ultimately result in the establishment of legislative coalitions and election committees (Ajay, 2003). The expansion of political parties is influenced by parliamentary democracies and regular elections. According to political scientist Ernest Barker, the British system is the progenitor of all parliamentary democracies since it established the first political parties. Barker claims that the Royalists and Parliamentarians clashed each other throughout the Civil War for the rights and powers of the king's parliament. During the 1830s, these two factions merged to become the Conservative and Liberal Parties (Joseph, 1972). They serve as a model for the two-party system in modern Britain. In the wake of electoral shifts in 1832, 1867, and 1884, new British political parties emerged. Due to increased transparency, once-dominant aristocratic elites have been deposed and ordinary individuals are increasingly taking part in government.

PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

The history of Party System in India, can be traced to the foundation of the Indian National Congress in its first ever meeting held on 29 December, 1885, in Bombay, created by the efforts of A. O. Hume and prominent personalities of an intelligentsia. Initially it was created for controlled public participation and to know public sentiments to avoid the repeat of an incident like 1857, which subsequently evolved as an organizational base for India's national movement against British imperialism. As the Indian National Congress consolidated organizationally and gained popularity amongst the people, it set in motion a process conducive for the crystallization of political parties and political groups, the process of different ideas to bloom, rules of political mobilization and competition among different groups to mobilize people on issues of public importance. Throughout the process, the Congress acted as a pivot on which party system hinged. The evolution of the Congress during the pre-independence period can be broadly divided into three stages during which it not only grew as a movement and a political party, it also developed the Indian Party System. During its first stage, from 1885 to 1905, it acted as an elite debating organization (Moderates), petitioning the government for extra privileges for the few, in a manner that has been described as 'mendicancy politics' (Ajay K. Mehra, Khanna D.D (etl) 2003). Second stage, spanning over a decade (1905-16), was crucial, as during this period, the great debate between moderates having faith in their strategy of petitions and appeals as well as a good sense of the British and the extremists who were for more aggressive strategy for pressing the demands took place (Jawarlal Nehru 1964). The Lal (Lala Lajpat Rai), Bal (Bal Gangadhar Tilak) and Pal (Bipin Chandra Pal) extolled the glorious past of India, particularly its militant dimension to raise self-confidence and believed in the statement of Tilak, 'Political rights will have to be fought for'. The two formally split in the Surat session of Congress in 1907, which continued for a decade. Both groups worked separately until they again came together in 1916. Viewed from the perspective of the emergence of the party system, the struggle between the moderates and extremist factions for more aggressive political tactics, continuing with two contrasting strategies within party until they split, carrying on with different strategies until they came together, not only reflects maturing of a political party but also demonstrate the beginning of the process of evolution of the party system. The Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the Muslim League in 1906, largely the effort of Tilak, accepting the demand of the Muslim League for a separate electorate for Muslims and Minorities, implemented since 1906 and provided for in the Act of 1909 in the Provincial and Imperial Legislative Councils was another example of the evolution of the party system.

Third stage, beginning 1916, when Congress took shape of mass movement, came to end in 1946 with formation of an interim Government, defined and developed the rule of game for the operation of the party system as from within the Congress and around it, rival groups developed and learnt the game of politics through collaboration with and in opposition to each other. Gandhi's return to India in 1915 and his joining the nationalist struggle transformed the nature of the movement and Indian politics through the principle of 'ahimsa and satyagrah' and participation of all sections of society (Ajay K. Mehra, Khanna D.D 2003). The transition in the strategy and social base of the Congress, from petitioning to mass politics, from intelligentsia to mass base, by the end of second decade was crucial for the development of the party system in India. With the opening of membership of the Congress organization to masses with each stage of civil disobedience movement during 1920s and 1930s (against the payment of land taxes, land reforms in rural areas of Bihar, Gujarat, Andhra and Uttar Pradesh), the base of the nationalist cadre and leadership widened to include persons from small towns and rural areas. The events unfolded in order to moderate extremist debate, Gandhi's differences with Jinnah and Subhash Chandra Bose and their parting of ways and the emergence of All India Forward Block in 1939 by Subhash Chandra Bose.

The formation of the Swaraj Party after Gaya session of the Congress in 1922 by CR Das over the issue of participation in the provincial assemblies and their return to Congress within five years strengthened the culture of dissent and created an atmosphere of tolerance. The formation of Congress

Socialist Party (CSP) group in 1934, with active involvement of Acharya Narendra Dev and Jaiprakash Narayan, principally opposed with the Gandhian strategy and tactics like Gandhi Irwin Pact of 1931 signified the evolution of a multi-stream and multi-ideology party (Walter K. Anderson and Sridhar D. Damle 1987). The contribution of CSP within the Congress by advocating different left oriented ideology was an indication of democratization of the party. Though after a prolonged disagreement with Patel group the Socialist felt compelled to leave the Congress in 1945, the existence of the CSP for a decade and half, and its politics contained the seeds of an emerging party system. The formation of Muslim League on 30 December 1906 was an extension of the quest of the Muslim intelligentsia and wealthy elite for a place under the British. It led them to contest the nationalist politics of the Congress and affirmation of loyalty to the Crown. The British took special care to see that members of separate identity existing among the Muslim elite were kept smoldering and were fanned into a raging flame by encouraging conflictual and communal politics of Muslim league.

This shows the emerging socio-economic contradictions that shaped the politics of that time. From its formation in 1906 till it made a demand for a separate state of Pakistan for the Muslims, it remained part of pre-independence party system. The communist party of India was first formed as an emigrant group by the end of 1920, by M.N. Roy. He dispatched several Indian communists trained in Russia to organize a communist movement in India. The party did not play any significant role in the Indian national movement and was banned many times by the British. It received the recognition of the government in July 1942 since it supported the British-Indian War Time Home policy and termed quit India's movement launched by the Congress as anti-people. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was established in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar along with four trusted friends in Nagpur. An active Congressman from 1916 to 1924, he was once general secretary of Nagpur Provincial Congress Committee. Activities of Islamic fundamentalist in 1920s across the country led him to believe in need of organizing Hindu society, particularly youth to keep a balance and obviate the possibility of Muslim domination. (Myron Weiner 1967). Even prior to RSS as an immediate reaction of founding of Muslim League, United Bengal Hindu Movement and Punjab Hindu Maha Sabha were established, which culminated in the establishment of Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha. It was later on joined by many Arya Samajis and active supporters and member of Congress like Lala Lajpat Rai and Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya, who continued simultaneously in Congress also. The new crop of Mahasabha Leaders like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar remained in active politics. So did Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the leader from Bengal, a prominent congress leader who on the difference over the issue of lenient attitude of Congress towards Pakistan in 1950, quit Congress and founded the BJS with active support of RSS.

Post Independent India

In Post-independent period, with the adoption of the Indian Constitution on January 26, 1950, political parties began preparing for the first General Elections. The various stages of evolution of the Indian party system shall be analysed as below

First Phase (1947-1967): One Party Dominance - The 'Congress System'

The first phase in the evolution of party system in India was marked by total dominance of Indian National Congress (INC) in Indian politics. This led Rajni Kothari, widely regarded as the most distinguished Indian Political expert, to remark that Indian party system is '*Congress System*' or *one party dominance* (Kothari, 1989, p.22). In the same tone, an English Political Scientist W. H. Morris-Jones has described the Indian party system as *one-dominant-party system* (Morris-Jones, 1978, p. 197). The first four general elections to the Indian Lok Sabha, 1952, 1957, 1961, and 1967, coincided with elections to all the state assemblies. In the first three of these, the Congress party won over two-thirds majority of seats in the Lok Sabha. It also won a majority of seats in the state assemblies during 1952-1962 except Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, and Kerala. In the Congress-dominated states, it fell a little short of a majority in Orissa (1952-7), Madhya Pradesh (1962), and Madras (1952).

Indian politics was a multi-party system, in which there was free competition among parties but in which the Congress enjoyed a dominant position, both in terms of the number of seats that is held in Parliament in Delhi and the state legislative assemblies, in terms of its immense organizational strength outside the legislatures (Manor, 2002, p.22). The ruling Congress party was a party of consensus and opposition parties constituted parties of pressure, i.e., the opposition parties did not constitute alternatives to the ruling party. Their role was to constantly pressurize, criticize, censure and influence the Congress by influencing opinion and interests within the latter (Kothari, 1989, pp.22-23).

Second Phase: Polarization of Regional Political Parties (1967-77).

The second phase extended from 1967 to the defeat of the Congress party at the general election of 1977. Though the Congress party still retained power at the center, the 1967 general election saw the party losing power in eight out of seventeen states (non-Congress coalition governments were formed in the states of Punjab, Haryana, UP, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Kerala) and its vote share at the national level decreased from 44 % in 1962 to 40 % in 1967 (The National Emergency, which extended over nineteen months from 26 June 1975, could however be seen as a separate phase in this story).

Here Morris-Jones detected the emergence of inter-party competition in Indian politics for the first time in India. He characterized the new system as '*a market polity*' (emphasis mine). By this is meant, Morris-Jones says, "a system in which a large number of decisions are taken by a substantial number of participants who stand in positions of both dependence on and conflict with each other. A process of bargaining reaches the decisions; no one is strong enough to impose his simple wish. Although the terms of trading fluctuated continuously, every outcome is some kind of compromise where what is hoped for gives way to what is practicable" (Morris-Jones 1978, p.146).

Kothari, on the other hand, maintains that although "the Congress reached an all-time low of popularity in 1967 and hence suffered serious electoral reverses. The size of these reverses was larger than any before or ever since. But it did not alter the basic premises of the system," that is, the Indian party system, in his opinion, remained 'Congress System'. But he did admit that 'the dominant party model has started to give way to a more differentiated structure of party competition.' (Kothari, 1989, pp.42-43).

After the 1971 mid-term polls the Congress party formed government at the center and people began to talk again of the return of 'one-party dominance'. But a huge shift occurred in the party system. Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi abandoned intra-party democracy wherein dissidence within the party was often termed as 'anti-party activity'. At the same time, she started adopting a confrontationist approach towards opposition parties whose activities were construed as 'anti-national'. And after she imposed an Emergency in the country on June 26, 1975 Fundamental Rights were suspended and opposition leaders as well as her critics were put behind bar. All this led to the breakdown of what was often referred to as a 'national consensus'. The hitherto consensus on a broad general national well-being in democracy.

Third Phase (1977-1998): The Multi-Party System.

The third phase in Indian party system is discernible from the coming of the Janata Party to power in 1977 at the center to the formation of another non-Congress BJP led government in 1998 at the center. In the first post-Emergency general election held in 1977, the Janata Party came to power by winning 295 Lok Sabha seats (41 % vote share). The Congress managed to get only 154 seats (34 % vote share). Thus, for the first time in India, a non-Congress government ruled in Delhi. The Janata Party was also able to form governments in a majority of the states in the same year. In this national election the two leading parties, the Congress and the Janata Party together polled 75 % of the popular votes. Some people have enthusiastically announced that the new development has heralded the arrival of a two-party system in India.

For instance a prominent writer on Indian politics Myron Weiner speculated about the prospects of an 'emergent two-party system' in the country (Weiner, 1978, p. 97). On the contrary Rajni Kothari, in his article 'Rebuilding the State (1977)', says that although the Janata Party victory had brought about the collapse of the Congress System, the notion of a two-party system is wholly inapplicable to a vast and diverse Indian society. He then goes on to say that "*the Indian party system is best conceived as a multi-party system*". He does not elaborate on his description of the Indian party system as a multi-party system. Perhaps it was then still too early to fully comprehend and theorize on the 'post-Congress' system. But Kothari seems to imply that party system in India has become multiparty because of two things: One, that the Janata Party was 'in fact more a coalition of parties than a single party'. This is, of course, true. The Janata Party consisted of a merger of five parties: Congress (O), Jana Sangh, Bharatiya Lok Dal, Socialist Party, and Congress for Democracy. Two, the increasing role of regional parties, especially the rise of CPI (M) in West Bengal, AIADMK in Tamilnadu, Akali Dal in Punjab, and the National Conference in Kashmir leading to what he calls 'regionalisation of the party system' (Kothari, 1990, pp. 286-7, 337).

It may be said that the first 'coalition national government', at least in the spirit, in India was the Janata government of 1977-1980. And an era of multi-party government system was set in India from this year on (i.e., since 1977). The Janata government however lasted for only two years and eight months (24/3/1977-14/1/1980) and the Congress returned to power in 1980 and 1984, on both occasions, it was able to form national government on its own. It is significant to note that though the Congress, under an extraordinary circumstance of the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, got the highest 415 seats in its history both in terms of Lok Sabha and its vote share (48%) in the 1984 general election, in the 1989 general election it had to sit in the opposition bench following its failure to get a majority. As a result, the National Front led by a former Congress leader V. P. Singh, a minority 5-party coalition government supported externally by the Left Front and the BJP formed Government at the center in 1989. In this V. P. Singh's government, the largest party Janata Dal had only 142 MPs and a vote share of just 17%. After being in power for eleven months (2/12/1989-10/11/1990), V. P. Singh's government was replaced by another minority government headed by Chandra Sekhar (who led a faction of the JD called JD Samajwadi) which was supported from outside by the Congress party. Within seven months (10/11/1990-21/6/1991), Sekhar's government also fell.

In 1991 with only 232 MPs, the Congress initially formed a minority government under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. But by December 1993, he managed to have a majority by bribing and admitting into the Congress party some MPs belonging to other parties such as Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and Janata Dal (Ajit). Rao's government was, in a way, thus a coalition of sort. Again between 1996 and 1998, there followed two minority 13-party coalition United Front governments headed first by H. D. Deve Gowda (1/6/1996-21/4/1997) and then by I. K. Gujral (21/4/1997-19/3/1998), supported by the Congress in both cases. Earlier, the BJP leader A. B. Vajpayee was standing alone in the Lok Sabha as Prime Minister for 13 days (16 May 1996-28 May 1996), waiting in vain for support from other parties. The BJP then had emerged as the single largest party after the 1996 general election with 161 MPs, for the first time ahead of the Congress party which managed a poor number of 140-the lowest ever tally in its history. The third phase in the evolution of Indian party system was thus marked by a multi-party system in which the system became quite competitive. No single party or one group of parties could dominate the system for any considerable length of time and Coalition governments became the order of the day. There was also constant realignments of forces and players. It took a penetrating foresight of Rajni Kothari to foresee this development when he wrote in 1977 in his 'Rebuilding the Polity', that "a live party system operating in a society facing a large agenda of problems to which there are no final and uniform solutions must periodically face a process of *realignment* (emphasis is Kothari's). This is like to be the case in India too in the coming years with a changing profile of constituents of the ruling coalition" (Kothari, 1990, pp.287-8). The period was also characterized by fragmentation of parties and the party system. The number of parties has

tremendously grown over the years. While only 74 parties contested in the 1952 Lok Sabha election, in the 1998 Lok Sabha election 177 parties were in the fray.

The emergence of this cleavage-based parties since 1990s, the increasing role of regional parties and naked pursuit of political power over ideology by parties have all contributed to fragmentations of the party system.

Fourth Phase (1998 to 2019): Loose Bi-Polar Alliance System

The last phase in the evolution of the Indian party system, starting from 1998 till the present day may be characterized as a '*loose bi-polar alliance system*'. The system is still a multi-party system, and it is still marked by the inability of any one party forming a national government on its own thereby necessitating formation of coalition governments. But the development and emergence of two distinct alliances at the national level, one led by the BJP called National Democratic Alliance and another led by the Congress called United Progressive Alliance is most unique, peculiar, perhaps alone to the Indian system. The emergence of bi-polar alliance system is more visible and more noteworthy than any other characteristics of the party system in today India, including the increasing multiplicity of parties as well as fragmentation of the system itself. However, given that the last phase is still characterized by a multi-party system, it may also be conceived as a '*multi-party loose bipolar alliance system*'.

Writing on the latest emerging trend in the Indian party system, Zoya Hasan says: "Thanks to India's social diversity and to the first-past-the-post electoral system, a nation-wide two party system has not emerged. At the national level, the BJP and the Congress have dominated the electoral contests in 1998 and 1999, obliging the regional parties to regroup around them and to coalesce into two distinct blocs: the BJP and its allies on the right and the Congress party and its allies in the middle. Regional parties such as the TDP, DMK, BSP, SP, and the Left parties retain significant influence and support in several states. At the national level, the organized expression of the 'third front' in the form of the 1996 United Front, a conglomeration of center-left parties has disintegrated, and most of its constituents have allied with the BJP. The fragmentation of the United Front has benefited both the BJP and the Congress" (Hasan, 2002, p.27). The 1996 general election is remembered in the Indian electoral history, among others, for one thing that for the first time, the Congress party was overtaken as the single largest party by the BJP when Congress won only 141 seats compared to the BJP's 161, although it remained the single largest party by a vote share with 28% compared to the BJP's 20%. And though the BJP could not form a government, its leader A. B. Vajpayee's humiliation for his inability to cobble together a required number in the Lok Sabha during his 13-day stint as Prime Minister in March 1996 was a turning point for the BJP. The party quickly learned to form alliances. As a result, a BJP-led minority coalition government consisting of 13 pre-poll (including two independents) and 9 post-poll allies (including five one-MP parties), and dependent on the support or abstention in confidence votes of at least the TDP and the NC, assumed power at the center on 19th March 1998. The BJP has increased its tally from 161 seats (vote share 20%) in 1996 to 179 seats (vote share 25%) in 1998. But the Congress was able to increase its tally of seats by a mere one seat, from 140 in 1996 to 141 in 1998; and its vote share decreased from 28% in 1996 to 25% in 1998.

However, Vajpayee government fell within 13 months on April 17, 1999 when one of the allies AIADMK withdrew its support, and after having lost the 'no confidence' motion in the Lok Sabha by just one vote. Sonia Gandhi's attempt to form a Congress-led government after the fall of the BJP-led government did not materialize for want of support from other parties. In the 1999, Lok Sabha elections, the BJP-led alliance christened National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Congress-led alliance fought against each other. The United Front disintegrated, being reduced to the Left Front and the rump Janata Dal (Secular) of Deve Gowda. The NDA was a more formal and more formidable alliance, having national platform and consisting of as many as 24 parties. The Congress-led alliance was a more tentative alliance with state-by-state agreements with no common national platform, consisting only 6 parties. The BJP-led alliance the NDA got 299 seats, with the BJP alone getting 182

seats thus continuing to hold its position as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha in 1999. On the other hand, the Congress got its lowest ever (till then) 114 seats, and managed to garner altogether 137 seats with allies. However, in terms of vote share, the BJP declined to 23% while the Congress rose to 28%, remaining the single largest party (in terms of vote share). The NDA formed a government with A. B. Vajpayee as Prime Minister. The government lasted a full term (though dissolved earlier on the Prime Minister's recommendation) thereby becoming the first non-Congress Union government to last its full term (L. H. Chhuanawma, 2020, p.122).

In the general election held in 2004, the Congress for the first time in its history went for a massive pre-poll alliance with other 11 parties. The BJP also continued its electoral alliance with other 9 parties. Defying all predictions by the national media and various opinion polls (which predicted a return of NDA to power), the Congress-led alliance with the support of the Left Front (CPI-M, CPI, Revolutionary Socialist Party and All-India Forward Bloc) was able to form a government. The Congress alone got 145 seats, and its vote share was 26% while the BJP got 138 seats with a vote share of 22%. The Congress alliance got 217 seats and the Left Front 59 seats while the BJP alliance got 185 seats. After the poll, the Congress-led alliance was christened as United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The UPA government headed by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan lasted a full term of five years (Ibid., 112-13).

The 2009 Lok Sabha election also witnessed a fight between the two political alliances, the UPA and the NDA. This time the Congress-led UPA comprised of 11 parties while the BJP-led NDA comprised of 8 parties. The Congress and its UPA allies won 262 seats (48% vote share), just short of 10 seats for a majority. The BJP and its allies won 159 seats. The UPA, with external support extended by the SP, BSP, RJD, JD(S) and some Independents formed a government with Dr. Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. Singh's government lasted a full term of five years (Ibid., p. 113).

In the Lok Sabha elections held in 2014 and 2019 were also fought primarily between the two alliances, the UPA and the NDA. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the 23-party alliance NDA won 336 seats (38% vote share), and the 13-party alliance UPA won only just 60 seats (23% vote share), others 147 seats. While the BJP won a staggering 282 seats on its own, (31% vote share), the INC won a mere 44 seats, its lowest ever Lok Sabha seats won till date (8% vote share). Though the BJP could have formed a government on its own, it decided to form a coalition government headed by Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister with its pre-poll alliance partners. Modi's government lasted for a full term of five years (Ibid., 113).

In the 2019, Lok Sabha elections, the NDA won 353 seats (45% vote share) and the BJP alone won 303 seats (37% vote share). The UPA won only 92 seats, while the INC managed to win just 52 seats (19% vote share). The rest of 98 seats were won by other parties. As in 2014, the BJP though being able to form a government on its own, decided to form a coalition government in 2019 as well with Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister. The latest trend in the Indian party system, it has become evidently clear, is the emergence of a bi-polar alliance system since 1998. One alliance, the NDA, is led by the BJP and another, the UPA, by the Congress. There is a subtle ideological divide between the two alliances; the UPA may be termed a 'left of the center' formation while the NDA may be termed a 'right of the center' formation. It is called 'loose' system as the system is still at its formative stage and the process of bi-polar consolidation at the national level is still on (Ibid. 113).

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