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TRENDS IN GROWTH AND FUNCTIONING OF POLITICAL PARTIES

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INTRODUCTION

Parties have been vital to democratic politics in India. The Indian party system has been unique and has gradually evolved with the process of social transformation in the country. The complexities and contradictions arising from the cleavages and heterodoxies of our society shape the dynamics of its functioning. Interestingly, party politics holds on to the plural ethos of our polity, though uneasily. The Indian party system has rich legacy, but is occasionally marked by volatility, ruptures, and pervasive crisis. Hence, the premonition from the western scholarship predicting its eventual decimation comes as no surprise. Nevertheless, the system has managed to not only deliver, but also has augured democratic practices. It is almost established by now that India is an example of a successful democracy and this fact is globally acknowledged. Parties do tend to feed on polarization and schism in society, but by and large, they closely monitor their moves to retain the support of the masses. Attempt towards extreme radicalization may put any party in pariah status. This sets in a natural check and balance system where the ground realities determine the dynamics of party politics. This chapter delineates the trajectory of party system in India, the dramatic shifts it has been through from pre-independence days to the contemporary times and analyses the challenges that beset the successful working of the electoral democracy in the country¹².

Definition and Typology

MacIver defined political party as an association organized in support of some principle or policy, which by constitutional means, endeavours to make the determinant of the government (MacIver,

¹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856599>

² [https://legallaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/\(VI\)Review%20of%20the%20Working%20of%20Political%20Parties%20specially%20in%20relation%20to%20Elections%20and%20Reform%20Options.pdf](https://legallaffairs.gov.in/sites/default/files/(VI)Review%20of%20the%20Working%20of%20Political%20Parties%20specially%20in%20relation%20to%20Elections%20and%20Reform%20Options.pdf)

1926: 326). According to Giovanni Satori, a party is a political group that presents and places candidates for public office through elections, Schumpeter states that the first and foremost aim of each political party is to prevail over the others to get into power or to stay in it. This goal of attaining political power distinguishes political parties from other groups in the political system, although the distinction is rather blurred at times, especially about pressure groups. It is generally agreed that democracy requires groups such as political parties to perform critical functions—recruit leadership, formulate policy, organize decision making, communicate upward and downward amongst leaders and the public, promote consensus, enforce responsibility, and move the society towards the effective resolution of its conflicts. They generate ideologies, beliefs, and symbols for political identification to the citizens³.

Nature and Legacy of the Indian Party System Background

The rise of nationalism in India in 19th century served as the backdrop for the emergence of political party. The British colonial rule produced enormous resistance and resentment among Indians. This acrimony resulted in development of feeling of nationalism and construction of the imaginary of India as a nation. It also helped the country to consolidate itself as a unified political entity. In 1885, association of middle-class professionals along with Allan Octavian Hume, created the Indian National Congress (INC). It is the oldest political party in India and one of the oldest parties in the world. By presenting Indian interest to the British Crown in a systematic and organized manner, the INC soon became a leading voice of the Indian middle class, constantly clamouring for more jobs under the colonial government and for greater political participation (Mitra, et al., 2004: 8). With this, a political process conducive for the crystallization of political parties and political groups were set in motion (Mehra, 2003: 25). The contribution of the INC in the independence movement and in shaping the political system in post-independence period has been seminal. It acted as the core of nationalistic assertion. This umbrella organization provided a national platform to all kinds of forces to unite against the colonizers. INC's sustained battle against British occupation gradually led the country towards liberation. Even in the post-independent era, Congress has been able to harmonize easily its basic elements of leadership with national appeal and acceptability, a pan-Indian ideology with recognition and accommodation of local and regional spirit and district level cadre (Khare, 2004: 32). Down the line, it tried to

³https://cse.google.com/cse?cx=015392979539865801994%3Afl61gngiqrg&q=TRENDS+IN+GROWTH+AND+FUNCTIONING+OF+POLITICAL+PARTIES&oq=TRENDS+IN+GROWTH+AND+FUNCTIONING+OF+POLITICAL+PARTIES&gs_l=partner-generic.12...21132.21132.0.22369.1.1.0.0.0.840.840.6-1.1.0.csems%2Cnr1%3D10...0...2.34.partner-generic..1.0.0.9W44Vg

continue to sustain its propensity for preserving democratic tradition, though sometimes it failed miserably. Despite its pan-Indian appeal, the Congress could not provide the nucleus for an institutionalized party system. It is interesting to investigate the initial debates surrounding the future of party politics in India in the post-independence era. Many seminal political figures were skeptical of the necessity of parties in the Indian political system. They cautioned against the trivialities and petty politics that parties tend to generate. Because of this reason, they took a clear and open stand against parties, advocating a democratic system free of them. The most prominent views were of M.K. Gandhi, the father of our nation, who was never comfortable with the idea of a polity driven by parties. Gandhi was deeply convinced that state and all its institutions are enmeshed with power and are inherently repressive to the people. State becomes the repository of endemic and organized violence and may pose a huge threat to the helpless citizens. Wary of such insinuation, in his last piece of writing Last Will and Testament, Gandhi, therefore, suggested the dissolution of Congress as a political organization after achieving independence and replacing it with Lok Sewak Sangh (Servant of People Association) (Narayan, 1970: 235). Gandhi prescribed a democratic system based on village self-government for the country and called it Gram Swaraj, where political parties will have no role. In his scheme of decentralization of power, there was no place for power-seeking political parties (Narayan, 1970: 240). Similar reverberations are found in the thoughts of Jayaprakash Narayan in his Gandhian phase. Narayan fervently advocated for party-less democracy with emphasis on decentralization of power, village autonomy, and more representative legislature. He observed that in parliamentary democracy, the electors are manipulated by powerful, centrally controlled parties, with the aid of high finance and diabolically clever methods, and super media (Narayan, 1959, p.66). However, this idea was outrightly rejected by the working committee of the Congress. It was in no mood to fiddle away its enormous power and support base that it had arduously generated over a long period of time. After independence, the nation began its journey of enduring democracy with parties at the centre of political mobilization and governance⁴.

Different Phases:

Parties and party system in India have transformed through different phases with the changing milieu. These phases can be generally categorized as the period from 1947–67 (marked by clear dominance of Congress), 1967–77 (noted by rising dissent and opposition, period of emergency), 1977–84 (rise of regional forces), 1984–90s (incoherent multiparty system), and contemporary

⁴ <https://innovationinpolitics.eu/polis-project/blog/the-3-trends-shaping-the-political-organisation-of-the-future/>

times (present two-coalition multiparty system). The first phase of the Indian party system (1947–67) is clearly marked by the monopoly of the Congress. When the Congress finally came to power at all levels of government beginning in 1947, it had years of invaluable seasoning under its belt, giving India an advantage unknown to many other decolonized nations (Varshney, 1998: 39). This specific historical context provided Congress the character of a mass organization. The monopolistic position of the Congress and the unorganized fragmented opposition which could not even adequately ventilate popular grievances, enabled the former to emerge as a formidable political structure (Kothari, 1961: 849). It is precisely because of this reason that the Indian party system has been famously described as “single-party dominance” (Morris-Jones: 1971) or the “one party dominant system” or “Congress System” by Prof. Rajni Kothari (Kothari: 1961). This implies that the working of the party system in India in the beginning was such that the Congress formed the core and rest of the parties operated from periphery, applying the pressure from the margins. Because of Congress's popularity and its rule-based internal functioning, no competitor with a similar nationwide mass base ever arose to challenge it for the leadership of the national movement (Varshney, 1998: 39). Even the conflict and dissent came from within the Congress rather from opposition parties outside Congress. This made the Indian party system ‘party of consensus and parties of pressure’ (Kothari, 2002: 40). The choice of 5 first-past-the-post electoral system also worked to the advantage of Congress. All these features of party politics in India in the immediate post-independent era rendered the presence of other smaller parties insignificant.⁵

Transformation of Indian Party System:

Rise of New Trends 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 soon, 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). This bipolarity became an increasingly stable feature of politics at the centre as well as in the states. The Congress and BJP became two power centres, deciding the alignment and framework of politics in India. These two parties turned out to be two decisive mobilizers overshadowing the rest of the parties in India. Even then for a good amount of time, no party has been capable of securing a single-party majority. They failed to accommodate the diverse 8 stakes of the electorate belonging to

⁵ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indian-democracy-and-the-changing-political-landscape/>

varied caste, class, religious, regional, linguistic, and ethnic interests, and fetch votes of all. The natural outcome has been two-coalitional party system in the form of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Congress and BJP, respectively. Balveer Arora believes that the new realities have resulted in federalization and renewal of party system in India. The federalization of party system seems to be a natural outcome of the extremely diverse political spectrum of India. But it requires an integrating arrangement that could ensure greater power and influence to the state-based parties. Congress was both unwilling and ill-prepared to assume this role, entrapped as it was in its centralist and dynastic legacies (Arora, 2013: 92). On the other hand, the BJP accepted coalition politics as inevitable and therefore engaged diligently to work out power sharing strategies. It understands that India's polity is a network of states in which castes, communities, classes, and parties cooperate and compete for benefits conferred by political power (Arora, 2013: 92). This party wins as it works out skillful alliance for successful federal coalitions. BJP has fetched steady electoral gains and established itself as an alternative to the Congress. Its ability to jell with the way the new middle class in India wanted to redefine the nation and articulate the cultural and material aspirations of this class helped it to consolidate (Yadav and Palshikar, 2003: 44). Oliver Heath has argued that the rapid political and geographical expansion of the BJP and its emergence as a main political force was due its ability to delicately redefine itself and its social base and forge alliances with regional parties having different social bases. Strategically, it distanced itself from the hard-core issues of Hindutva with which it was associated since its inception, due to necessities of real politics. It sought to accommodate its coalition partners by publishing a national agenda which omitted the controversial issue of the building of Ram temple at Ayodhya, the Uniform Civil Code, and Kashmir's special constitutional status as a part of its moderation strategy (Basu, 2002: 399). BJP mellowed down its militancy and repositioned itself to invoke a pan-Indian appeal. It realized that moderation and centrist ideology can only stabilize it in the longer run. Therefore, we see periodic toning up and subduing of its Hindutva rhetoric displaying cycles of moderation and militancy according to the contingent situation (Kumari, 2009: 226). A closer observation alludes to the dwindling importance of ideology in party politics in India. Ideology never remains static for a party but undergoes transformation along with time and experience, the compulsions of practical life and in interactive struggle with rival ideological tendencies (Suri, 2004). Often, it is used to disguise the tactics to gain votes from the electorate. Moreover, apart from communist parties, most parties define themselves as secular and democratic parties; that do not identify themselves in terms of left or right. While electoral fortunes of BJP surged in recent times, few

old parties like Communist party⁶⁷.

Challenges and Prospects

Numerous obstacles can be identified in the way of functioning of party politics in India. It has a long history of social inequalities and social injustice. Endemic problems such as poverty, illiteracy, and backwardness have kept on rocking its boat and freedom for all has been a far-fetched dream. Society has been hierarchically constituted on the lines of caste, 12 class, gender, religion, ethnicity, linguistic identities, and so on. Discrimination has been rampant on these bases leading to exclusionary tendencies in politics. Political parties had this huge task of reconciling aspirations of all sections and ushering in the goal of incremental change in a fragile society like India. The feminist and subaltern critique of society exposes the denial of equal rights and entitlement to women, dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized sections. Corridors of political power are typical male bastion and deliberately deny admission to women. Political parties are informed by patriarchal constructs, societal prejudices, and cultural practices that hinder the free and fair political participation of women and other weaker sections. Political discourses of parties have been deliberately dismissive of the question of women. The persistent feminist struggles for equality and empowerment resulted in the 73rd and 74th Amendment Act, 1992 resulting in the 33 percent reservation for women in the Panchayati raj institutions, mahanagarपालikas and municipalities. There is assiduous demand for replicating this reservation for women in the lower house of the Indian parliament and in state legislative assemblies in the form of Women's Reservation Bill but has been pending so far. Parties should also ensure at least 30 percent reservation for women at every organizational position.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the Indian experience of party system is unique in itself. Since the 1950s till present times, it has been constantly evolving with the changing milieu. The changing contours of India's electoral politics are, in significant ways, a reflection of new assertion among the socially and economically underprivileged sections of Indian society. Despite working amidst hierarchically constituted diverse interests, most parties in India represent the entire spectrum of the society. They have been creatively engaged with the issues of entitlement and social justice. The recent phenomenon of increasing federalization of parties reaffirms our faith in diversity and

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_party

⁷ <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/66624/1/Unit-1.pdf>

heterogeneity and has further strengthened the democratic fabric of the nation. Indian party politics gives the impression of the country as a pluralist society, where the interests of multiplicity of private associations and other various forces is aggregated, and they have considerable influence on policy formation (Brass, 1994: 65). Nonetheless, as political parties are public institutions, they must refrain from becoming dynastic and converting governance into their family business. Summary of the Chapter • Clearly, there have been remarkable.

