

THE INDIAN PARTY SYSTEM AND PARTY SYSTEMS IN THE STATES SINCE 1989

MOULI DEY

Abstract of the Thesis submitted to the Department of Political Science, University of North Bengal, 2018

Abstract

The evolution and the nature of the Indian Party System have always attracted scholarly attention. Scholars like Rajni Kothari (1964 & 1974), Myron Weiner's (1971), Anindaya Saha (1999), James Manor (2002), Balveer Arora (2002, 2003), Pradeep Chibber (2004), E. Sridharan (2002 & 2011), Prakash Sarangi (2005), Zoya Hasan (2007), Diwakar (2017) etc. all have written at length on the nature and features of the Indian Party System. There are some studies on the nature and changes that have taken place on the state party systems as well like that of Sridharan (2002 & 2011). We note that the Indian Party System has always remained in a state of flux. Thus it becomes imperative to study what has led to these changes at various stages. The party system is said to have been moving from a one-party dominated system to a multi-party system, from a period of social and ideological cohesive coalitions to factionalism and hence fragmentation, from stability to fluctuations and instability. The Indian Party System has in fact made a long journey. Similarly different patterns of state party systems have emerged from a Congress dominated one. The Indian party system has become fragmented at two levels. This pattern of fragmentation (is the outcome of numerous factors that in fact impact the trajectory of the Indian party system) is discernible at the state level since 1967 to till date.¹Hence it is very well

¹ In MP, Rajasthan, HP, Karnataka, and Gujarat and in Delhi the party system has largely become a two-party system with the contest mainly oscillating between the Congress and the BJP. In other states such as Punjab, Bihar, J &K, Andhra Pradesh, Assam the contest for power revolved around state-based parties and either of the two national parties, viz. Congress party or the BJP. Tamil Nadu had a different story where since 1967, the nature of the party system had become bipolar in nature with the competition revolving between the two leading state -based parties, namely, DMK and AIADMK and the Congress which till 1967 was the ruling party.

discernible that the Indian party system does not possess a uniform character and exhibits a fragmented character due to various reasons.

The Research Problem

The Congress however was able to come to power at the centre with the 1980 and 1984 election recuperating the downslides of 1967, 1971 and 1977 elections but again with the 1989 elections it was seen that no single party was able to secure absolute majority and this led to the consolidation of the coalition era. However, the Indian Party system did not lose its multi-party based fragmented character. Although a series of other developments like the rise of National Front, United Front and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have taken place but the Indian party system did not shed its multi-party fragmented character. This feature had cemented its base more pronouncedly since 1989 when Congress party slipped into the state of deep decline both at the central and state level. Although no other party was able to replace the Congress but it was seen that the BJP was in the position to emerge as an alternative force to the Congress (I) as it was able to improve its position in the Lok Sabha from 2 to 85 (Andersen, p.532, 1990) and was able to form a government with the 11th general election by bagging 161 seats polling 20.29 percent of votes (www.eci.nic.in).² With the 12th general election BJP had established itself as a political force to reckon with. In 1998, BJP again came to power by securing 182 seats but could not complete its term over its dissensions with its allies and ultimately in 1999 with the thirteenth general elections it formed its coalition government under the banner National Democratic Alliance (NDA) of which it was the leading partner and completed a full tenure. This made a profound impact on the Indian Party system which again reoriented itself into a bipolar multi-party system. Since then it has been claimed that at the central level the party system has mainly oscillated between the Congress party and its significant competitor, the Bharatiya Janata Party. In the Indian party system the role of the regional parties was no less insignificant. They helped in the

²It remained in power for two weeks. BJP and its allies could manage to accumulate just 194 seats which were far away from the required 272 seats needed to prove its majority. BJP failed to enter into any coalitional arrangement required to come to power and therefore it had to step down.

realignment and formation of government at the centre and in the states. These two significant developments have made huge impact in the Indian party system thereby making changes in its configuration. If observed the Indian Party System has no uniformity as the state level and the national level and is marked by different type of state party systems. More particularly, since 1967 we can see that state have chosen to have their distinct party systems³.

However, with the 2004 general election the equation witnessed a reverse swing when again the INC surpassed all the other parties and scored 147 seats to form the coalition government at the centre under the banner of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) of which it was the leading partner thereby replacing the BJP-led NDA government. However, a dramatic shift took place in the Indian party system with the 2009 election. With the 2009 election the INC improved its performance by 86 seats securing 206 seats alone and 262 seats were bagged by UPA of which INC became a leading partner (www.eci.nic.in). With the 2009 general election the BJP led NDA stood distant second with 159 seats (www.eci.nic.in). Many of the regional parties who had earlier played a significant role in the Indian Party System got marginalised to a great extent when lot many of the king makers like the Rashtriya Janata Dal, Lok Janshakti Party, Telegu Desam Party were cut to size. The party system witnessed a significant realignment when the then dominant Congress party again came to the forefront as the leading partner of UPA. Since then the UPA headed by the Congress party had played a much more assertive and a dominating role. However, the dynamics started changing when again the Congress led UPA government was being charged of incompetence when it was not able to tackle the issue of rising prices, corruption in the backdrop when the UPA's significant ally DMK got involved with the charges of some serious cases of corruption namely the 2G scam, CWG Scam, etc. All these circumstances contributed positively to the prospects of the BJP and other contenders for power. All these developments led to changes in the Indian Party system and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government was dislodged from

³ With the 1967 elections the Congress failed to emerge victorious with a clear majority in almost nine out of the then existing sixteen states which included Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras and Kerala.

power and in a turn of event Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government came to power. BJP emerged victorious with the 2014 Lok Sabha election with absolute majority of seats. However, it opted to form the government at the union level with its pre-poll allies. These developments led to significant changes in the Indian party system. Besides, factors like cleavage, conflicts, identity, etc. in my opinion “*aspirations*” (for growth, development, social justice and equity) of the populace has assumed a significant importance that happens to determine the trajectory of the party system at both the levels. Hence, factors like *Popularity and Populism, Performance and Positivism* largely influence the trajectory of the Indian party system at both the national and state level. Hence an effort has been made with this study to see how these above discussed factors influence elections (both general and state polls) and thus bring transformation in the Indian party system at both the national and state level.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the work was to study the Indian party system since 1989, identify its features, analyse the nature of the state party systems and its features which have acquired its own distinctive characteristics and identify the reasons behind the bifurcation between the national and state party systems. Through my work we have also seen what changes the Indian party system has gone through with the 16th general election when the ruling government headed by the Congress was showing signs of decline due to corruption, scandals etc. The work has as well studied the changes that have occurred in the state party systems with the subsequent state assembly elections. The work also explores how factors like popularity, positivism, populism and performance cast impact upon the party system at both the national and state levels.

Research Questions

Through my work I have tried to answer some research questions such as the following:

- a) What are the central features of the Indian party system since 1989?
- b) What are the various causes that have contributed to the changes in the nature of the Indian Party System in the recent period? Trace how the decline of the Indian National Congress, the growth of the BJP and the expansion of the Regional parties bring transformation in the Indian Party system.
- c) Identify what are the central features of the state party systems that have evolved since 1989? Locate the factors that have contributed to the growth of the various state party systems in different regions of the country.
- d) What are the factors that have contributed towards the bifurcation of the party system between the national and state level in the absence of any similarity between the state party systems and the National party system?
- e) Discuss what are the factors that will bring changes in the Indian Party System and the state party systems in the near future?

Party System can be conceived as a constellation of numerous political parties who compete to come to power and form government to deliver governance. With regard to India because of its heterogeneous composition the party system has been largely multi-party in nature. However, if defined structurally it has been largely one party dominated for long as also mentioned by Rajni Kothari (1964) in his article entitled "The Congress system in India". Through the article he has tried to show that India largely had a one-party dominant system where the Indian National Congress (INC) had enjoyed undisputed hegemony. The Congress party has assumed the role of a "party of consensus" and gave enough room to the 'parties of pressure' that had existed as independent force (Kothari: 1964). Other political forces too existed but had played rather understated roles. To Kothari, mediated politics by the Congress party had prevented other parties from gaining in strength and this had enabled the Congress Party to emerge as the dominant

force during the post-independence period. Chapter 2 of the thesis explores the various reasons that propelled the process of the bifurcation (in the early years of 1960s) of the Indian party system into national and state party systems. The Congress Party after independence made efforts to emerge as the popular party. It cultivated a nationalistic support base for itself, it adopted secularism to increase its support base and besides employing several other strategies to emerge as the popular party it concentrated on building a well-knit organisation for it to widen and consolidate its support base in the country. Due to these various reasons INC could surpass other parties (such as Hindu Mahasabha, Congress Socialist Party, Swaraj Party, etc.) in terms of influence and came to power. However, it could just emerge as the “majority party” and not a dominant party because with successive elections due to various political developments its performance decreased in terms of number of seats and votes and it even occupied the position of an opposition party for numerous times. The party system was multi-party in origin where INC in few general elections could just bag for itself more than half of the parliamentary seats in the absence of any potential alternative. Factors like the Indo-China War of 1962 (which highlighted nations’ military unpreparedness) which shattered Nehru’s popularity, fall in food grain production, over emphasis on industrialisation, origin of class conflict due to partial benefits of green revolution, defection, conflicts over political opportunities, regionalism, etc. are some of the reasons that led to initiation of the process of the bifurcation of the party system into national and state level. Chapter 2 also enlists some basic reasons for the fragmentation of the party system into two levels. With the bifurcation of the Indian party system the Indian party system has become more fragmented in nature. Anti-Congreeism, rise of regional outfits, birth of new aspirants for political power due to circulation of elites from lower to higher levels, growth of regionalism in lesser developed areas to combat the truncated economic, agricultural, industrial and growth policies of the then Congress-led central government are some of the reasons for the fragmentation of the country. Besides, the chapter enlists some of the features of the Indian party system, namely, fragmentation, politics based on populism, rise in multiplicity of political parties, factionalism, etc. Chapter 3 and 4 concentrates on discussing the

numerous factors that led to growth of state party systems. Politics driven by self-motives, conflicts over political opportunities, rift between upper caste and lower caste, unsatisfactory performance by ruling government, rise in identity-based politics, quota politics, the urge for good governance laced with social justice, equity and comprehensive development, etc. are some of the reasons that encouraged the growth of multiple state party systems. Chapter 5 concentrates on the idea that any changes in the party system at both the national and state level in recent years are driven by four parameters namely, Popularity and Populism, Performance and Positivism. Although other factors like cleavages, ethnicity and identity will tend to dominate the course of Indian politics and the party system at both the national and state level but these four parameters will have an edge over these factors. Hence the 14th, 15th, 16th Lok Sabha and the subsequent assembly elections have been discussed to testify to this fact that how Popularity and Populism, Performance and Positivism are largely determining and shaping the course of Indian Party System at the national and state level. Chapter 6 deals with the conclusion which summarizes the entire discussion on the topic. Hence it can be fairly concluded that the Indian party system is characterised by two variance of the party system. Numerous reasons have facilitated in the process of this bifurcation which in turn has made the Indian party system fragmented in nature. Each state vote by taking into consideration numerous state-specific issues. However, in present times factors such as populism (pro-people/populist policies and strategies), performance, popularity (of a political leader/party) and positivity (ability to raise hope with conviction by a political leader/ party for a better tomorrow) tend to influence the voting behaviour of the Indian masses. Factors such as cleavages, identity, conflicts, etc. have been set aside to a large extent by the Indian masses as their urge for a better tomorrow or their inclination for comprehensive development have become a significant barometer that guided their electoral logic. Based on these factors the electorates cast their vote. Parity between proclamations (in the form of manifestoes, programmes, vision documents, poll promises, etc.) and performance (by the ruling national/state government) is the crux behind survival and sustainability of a political party in power.

Academic Significance of the Study

This particular endeavour of ours is academically significant and relevant since it is necessary to understand the reasons for the changing nature of the Indian party system since 1989 and the changing state party systems in the different regions of the country. Local political parties also play a significant role in influencing and shaping of state party systems hence the study will figure out the role of local parties (or the newly formed political novice) in the state party systems and its impact on it which has not been done in the study of state party systems. Prakash Sarangi (2005) in his article “Economic Reform and Changes in the Indian Party System” is also of the opinion that the Indian party system has undergone several transformations since independence. He is of the opinion that economic development and economic reforms have a direct bearing on the nature of the party system which influences the voting behaviour of the masses. Regionalism has been the outcome of it and has led to the fragmentation of the party system. Hence, growth of newly formed parties (mostly political novice in the state)⁴ or local political parties can be studied which cast an impact on the party system by either splintering votes or accumulating votes which subsequently either wrest or facilitates the chance of victory for the main contenders for power. This multiplicity of political parties tends to realign party system and keep it bifurcated and fragmented in nature. Moreover, the thesis encapsulates how the parameters like performance, popularity, positivity, populism has directed the course of Indian party system in recent times more particularly since 2004 Lok Sabha elections and the subsequent assembly elections. Anindya Saha (1999) in the article “The Indian Party System 1989-1999” has mainly discussed about the transformation, reconfiguration and realignment in the Indian party system both at the national and state level till 1989. Following these he has tried to analyze the causes that has led to these series of transformation of the once Congress dominated Indian party

⁴ Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, the political novice in the state of Maharashtra influenced the vote share of Shiv Sena and BJP in the 2009 Lok Sabha and assembly polls. Similarly BSR Congress and KJP have also splintered votes of BJP in the recent 2013 Karnataka assembly polls. Party system is full of such novices and they influence verdicts immensely and lead to significant reconfiguration and realignments.

system. Growing mass consciousness, lack of established political cultural, departure of Congress party from consensual politics and regionalization of party politics, etc. are some of the important reasons for the reconfiguration of the Indian party system. In fact with the passage of each successive year if observed carefully, then it is the performance of the ruling government or government delivering on the line of social justice and equity are having better chance of survival. However, the author has not explored this reason in detail. Hence my work emphasizes on the study of 14th, 15th and 16th Lok Sabha elections and subsequent assembly elections to testify to the fact that how these parameters namely, popularity, positivism, performance and populism are largely steering the course of the Indian party system at both the national and state level.