



Role of Indian Constitutional Nationalism in Shaping Political Dynamics of Manipur: A Review of Relevant Literature.

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical exploration of the relationship between the conceptual idea of the state, the framework of constitutional nationalism, and the practical agency of political parties. It argues that these are not isolated concepts but exist in a dynamic, mutually constitutive relationship: state's ideological foundations shape the constitutional order, which in turn sets the rules of engagement for parties, while parties, through electoral competition and governance, continuously reinterpret and reshape both constitutional principles and the very idea of the state. Focusing on India, the paper investigates how a specific Indian nationalism, as codified in its constitutional preamble (sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic), has fundamentally shaped the nation political party system. It acknowledges that a robust party system is essential for the functioning of a democratic state, but also delves deeper into the complex interplay between democracy, parties, and identity. A key theme is how parties strategically navigate and negotiate the tensions between pan-Indian national identity and distinct ethnic, regional, and subnational identities. The paper emphasizes the adaptability of political parties, examining their strategies in heterogeneous societies to build coalitions, mobilize voters, and manage conflicts. The literature available provides concrete grounding by analyzing party strategies in a multi-ethnic society like Manipur, where national parties and regional outfits must constantly engage with layered identities. The review identifies gaps, suggesting future research into how evolving conceptions of nationalism affect party evolution, how regional parties reimagine constitutional principles, and the long-term implications of this ongoing negotiation for Indian federalism and democratic consolidation.

Key words: nationalism, political parties, ethnicity, state.

1. Introduction

Constitutional nationalism is a framework that prioritizes the foundational values of the Indian Constitution—such as unity amidst diversity, democratic rights, social justice, federalism, and secular democracy—as the primary basis for national identity and integration (Inclusivity of Indian nationalism, 2025). This form of nationalism derives its legitimacy and content from a nation's constitution. It posits that civic loyalty should be directed toward the constitutional order and its enumerated values—such as popular sovereignty, fundamental rights, equality, and the rule of law—rather than to pre-political ethnic, religious, or cultural identities. In the Indian context, it is associated with a vision of the nation as inherently diverse, united by a shared commitment to constitutional morality as articulated by figures like B.R. Ambedkar. This concept can be contrasted with forms of Indian nationalism that draw primarily upon cultural narratives and selective historical interpretations of the freedom struggle (Jaffrelot, 2021). It defines the Indian nation primarily in terms of a shared cultural heritage, history, and identity, viewing the state as the political expression of this majority culture. This stands in tension with constitutional nationalism's pluralist and civic ideals.

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Available literature review points to a critical step in academic research, as it establishes a comprehensive understanding of existing scholarship on interconnected concepts like nationalism, the state, and political party system dynamics in an electoral democracy (Snyder, 2019). Such a review examines how nationalism, functioning as both a political principle and a cultural project, interacts with and influences the architecture of party systems within democratic frameworks. On one hand, political principle is referred to as a doctrine of political legitimacy, it holds that the political (the state) and the national (the people) should be congruent. It provides a framework for collective self-governance and sovereignty. On the other, cultural project often involves deliberate efforts to construct, promote, and sustain a shared national identity through symbols, narratives, education, and sometimes the assimilation or marginalization of sub-national cultures. A thorough literature review enables a researcher to identify gaps, ongoing debates, and varied methodological approaches, ensuring that new research contributes meaningfully to the scholarly discourse (Booten, 2016).

2. Themes on Nation and Nationalism

The concept of nation and nationalism has been essentially associated with the term state, to the extent that both terms are used interchangeably. Conner's essay "Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?" (1972), argues state and nation as two distinct concepts and defines state as, "a legal concept describing a social group that occupies a definite territory and is organised under common political institution and an effective government", and nation as, "a social group which shares a common ideology, common institutions and customs, and a sense of homogeneity." The nation as a product of modernisation provides a completely different picture of the nation and nationalism. Scholars like Gellner and Anderson consider nationalism as a concept that emerged during the 18th century in the context of Industrial Revolution. Gellner argues that the kind of cultural homogeneity which is required for nationalism is found in modern industrial society which gives birth to nations. However, since the homogeneous cultures of the industrial societies in all parts of the world did not arrive simultaneously at the same manner, it breeds conflict (such as class, language, cultural, ethnic conflicts) among the inhabitants, fighting for the legitimacy for its own political roof (Gellner, 1983). Anderson in his work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (2006) defines nationality, nation-ness and nationalism as cultural artefacts of a particular kind created towards the end of the 18th century. In electoral democracies, parties become the vehicles through which these imagined communities articulate interests, contest power, and negotiate belonging.

3. Evolution of the concept of Party System in India

Duverger traced the evolution of party system to the 18th and 19th century England. In his seminal work, *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State* (1951), he provided a detailed explanation of how political parties and party systems originate and evolve in societies. He argued that the primary objective of the parties is to acquire political power, or to share the exercise of such power. Criticising Duverger, Sartori believed that party systems should not be understood only by the number of parties, but by the interactions and relevance of those parties in shaping political competition. In his seminal work, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (1976), Sartori introduced the idea that not all parties in a system are relevant. Sartori's theory is relevant in understanding the Indian party system. At the national level, India evolved from a predominant party system (Congress era) to a multiparty system. In a conflict-prone state like Manipur, the party system is characterised by fragmentation due to ethnic and ideological polarisation and difficulty in achieving a stable coalition, reflecting aspects of polarized pluralism.

4. Indian Nationalism and Sub-nationalism as Base of the Party System

The Indian nation building process in the post-independent India is sufficiently discussed in Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* (1998). He argues that India's pre-colonial culture, the colonial experience of the state, followed by the question of nationalism, democracy and economic development had their influence in the creation of modern India. He stresses on contest over right to territory and secessionist movements that started in the north eastern homeland and Kashmir (Khilnani, 1998). *India and North-east India: Mind, Politics and the process of Integration 1946-1950* (1998), by Sajal Nag, dwells around the growth of a pan Indian consciousness among the leaders of Indian National Congress with the departure of the British, the process of the integration of north-eastern states with India, with special reference to the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. *Contesting marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Sub-nationalism in North-East India* (2002) Sajal Nag, deliberates on the marginalisation of the northeast states and their political movements in the Indian nationalist discourse and the growth of secessionism in the region to contest marginality.

5. Constitutional Nationalism and Party system in context of Manipur

The analysis of Indian scholars like Thomas Pantham, Rajni Kothari, Zoya Hasan, Rekha Diwakar is significant to understand the concept of Indian nationalism and constitutional nationalism and the impact it has on the party system in India. These scholars highlight the role of Indian National Congress in the lines of Constitution's preamble in shaping Indian politics. Diwakar meticulously examines BJP's interpretation of nationalism exclusive based on Hindutva politics.

Thomas Pantham (1976) has contributed significantly to debates on democracy, political parties, and Indian political thought. His work essays like *Political Parties and Democracy in India* offers critical reflections on the role of political parties in a democracy within India's socio-political scenario. He views political parties as indispensable institutions in liberal and representative democracies, that mediate between citizens and the state, articulating interests and providing avenues for participation. However, parties can also undermine democracy if they become overly centralized, clientelist, or unresponsive. In *Electoral Politics in Northeast India*, S. Chaube (1985) examines the political landscape of the northeastern states of India, focusing on how elections are conducted and how regional, ethnic, cultural, and political factors shape the political environment in this area. In *Party System and Election Studies*, Kothari (1981) focuses on the dominance of the Congress Party at the time and how it impacted the political landscape of post-independence India. He also goes on to explain the rise of regional parties and the emergence of coalition politics as a key feature of the evolving political system, especially after the 1977 Emergency. One of Kothari's most important contributions is his examination of the relationship between party systems and social cleavages (such as caste, class, region, and religion). Similar analyses can be seen in Zoya Hasan's *Parties and Party Politics in India* (2002), offering insights on the roles of national and regional parties in the development of party politics in post-independent India and how regionalism, caste, religion, and ideology have influenced party behaviour. Hasan critiques majoritarian policies in governance and emphasises on inclusivity. Rekha Diwakar's *Party System in India* (2018) provides a comprehensive and analytical overview on the political party system in India that emerged along with the rise of nationalist aspirations. The book meticulously charts the trajectory from the era of the "Congress system," to the rise of the BJP from a marginal political entity to a dominant national force, characterised by ideological mobilisation around Hindu nationalism, with the expansion of its social base beyond its traditional urban, upper-caste core.

In the context of a state like Manipur, the political party system to some extent mirrors the overall Indian sub-continental experience in the British colonial phase of history. N. Lokendra's *The Unquiet Valley: Society, Economy, and Politics of Manipur (1891-1950)* (1998) traces the transition from a sovereign kingdom to a region grappling with colonial and post-colonial integration. Lokendra describes the emergence of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, which agitated for democratic rights and constitutional reforms. He deliberates on the critical political developments that push for a democratic constitution and the historic election of the Manipur State Assembly in 1948, which established a representative government before the merger with India. The book concludes by framing the controversial merger of 1949 not as an isolated event, but as the culmination of these complex social fermentations and political struggles, setting the stage for the subsequent decades of conflict and identity assertion. Shyamkishor's *Party System in Manipur* (2012) argues that the foundational weakness of the party system in Manipur was cemented in the immediate post-merger period, disrupting the organic institutionalisation of political parties, forcing them to re-orient themselves within a new and imposed political framework, often leading to ideological confusion and fragmentation. With no single party able to secure a stable majority on its own, post-election alliances have become the norm. The book elaborates on how this has led to highly opportunistic and ideologically incoherent coalitions, often bringing together national parties like the Indian National Congress or the Bharatiya Janata Party with a plethora of small regional and single-issue parties.

6. Conclusion

The review of literature reveals a rich tapestry of theoretical insights and empirical analyses that collectively deepen our understanding of political party systems within electoral democracies, especially in the context of nationalism and identity politics. Foundational theorists like Duverger, Sartori, and Anderson offer distinct lenses through which the evolution and behaviour of party systems can be interpreted. Their frameworks illuminate how electoral systems shape party configurations, how ideological distance influences political stability, and how nationalism constructs the symbolic boundaries of political belonging. These theories converge on the idea that party systems are not merely institutional outcomes but dynamic reflections of socio-political cleavages, historical legacies, and strategic agency. The regional scholarship on India and Manipur—through the works of Pantham, Diwakar, Shyamkishor, Singh, and Lokendra—grounds these abstract models

in lived realities, revealing the complexities of fragmented mandates, coalition politics, and weak institutionalisation. In Manipur, ethnic diversity, insurgency, and elite opportunism have produced a party system marked by instability and transactional politics, challenging the normative ideals of democratic representation. Ultimately, this body of literature affirms that understanding party systems in ethnically diverse and conflict-prone democracies requires a synthesis of structural, ideological, and cultural perspectives—where nationalism is both a force of unity and a fault line of division.

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