

# Role of Political Parties in History of Indian Elections

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## **Abstract :-**

The working of political parties in India over more than five decades after Independence presents us a contrasting picture of partial success, serious shortcomings and huge challenges. As such it generates mixed or contradictory feelings in us. While the success gives us some satisfaction, the shortcomings cause disquiet, and the challenges leave us in a state of doubt. These challenges could be a result of their initial success and rooted in their shortcomings. The shortcomings are due to the gap between what the party leaders profess and practice; between the expectations of people for more benefits and the inability of parties to deliver; between the increased authoritarian leadership styles and the larger dynamics of democracy. The liberalisation process in a way increased the pressure on parties, as they go ahead with policies to transform the state into one based on the principles of market economy, while they continue to profess a state based on the principles of socialism. We often hear that party leaders are indulging in double talk on economic reforms and welfare, but we must understand why they do so.

**Keyword-** *Shortcomings, Presents, Contrasting, Partial, Generates, Expectations, Democracy, Transform, Increased, Socialism, Liberalisation.*

## **Introduction:**

In the initial years after Independence, several observers of Indian politics, especially from the West, were sceptical about India's inner strength, political maturity and democratic values to sustain parties that make democracy work. Now very few would deny the success of political parties in managing this vast and pluralistic country with social inequalities, poverty, illiteracy and backwardness in a democratic framework. Surely, many of us are unhappy with the way parties work today. But very few of us would be willing to envisage a democratic political system without parties. In as much as political parties have become indispensable to democratic politics of our time across the world we can take parties in India as given and seek to explain as to what has brought the country to such a pass, and explore the ways in which party domain would develop in the times to come. This study is premised on the view that in any attempt to understand the working of parties in India not much purpose will be served if we take a deprecatory view, dismissing them as hopeless entities serving only the interests of the excessively selfish interests of party leaders. Equally, not much purpose will be served by taking a romantic view of parties.

The world of political parties in India seems to be in an unending flux. Parties have been coming into existence and going out of existence. They have been splitting and coming together. Even those parties that appear to be stable in name have undergone important changes in their content and internal arrangement of constituent elements. The terms fragmentation and federalisation are often used to characterise this situation. This transformation is often seen in terms of several transitional points—from the emergence of one party dominant system to its break down, to incoherent multiparty system to the present two-coalitional multiparty system. Over the past five decades, party competition has increased. In their fight for gaining or retaining power, often they pursued adversarial politics with confrontationist postures, policies and programmes. At the same time they exhibited a great deal of flexibility in shifting stands and alliances when it comes to winning elections or sharing power. This transformation can be also understood in terms of changes in the internal structuring and functioning of parties. Decline in the quality of leadership, increasing criminality and corruption among party leaders, undermining of constitutional and democratic institutions by both ruling and opposition parties, growth of factionalism,

stifling of internal democracy, concentration of power in a single leader, etc. It could be also understood in terms of the social bases of parties and the shifts in them, strategies and tactics adopted by party leadership in managing people and government, and in winning elections and forming governments. Growth of populism, appeals to sentiments such as caste, religion, region, tribe and language, use of money, muscle power and other allurements and recourse to electoral and political malpractices to gain or retain power are some aspects of this phenomena .

Cultural pluralism, social diversity and the multiple philosophical schools had been the major characteristic of the country which must have gone into the process of giving shape to a multiparty system with all its complexities. As Rajni Kothari pointed out, a striking feature of India's historical culture and tradition is the great variety and heterogeneity. This is due to the diversity of ethnic and religious groups; the eclectic rather than proselytising style of integration characteristic of Hinduism; absence of either a unifying theology or a unifying secular tradition; and highly differentiated social system that has brought functional hierarchies, spiritual distinctions and ritual distances into a manifold frame of identities and interdependence. Through centuries India has developed what may be called a 'consensual style' in dealing with problems and issues. The pluralistic characteristics coupled with consensual style led to the development of multiparty' system in India with some of its unique features (Kothari, 1970a: 152-67).

Long experience in mobilising and organising people, working of political parties and politics of representation during freedom struggle kept the parties in India in good stead after independence. Parties emerged as hybrids on the Indian soil under the influence of western political ideas and practice during the colonial condition, and acquired characteristics of their own in the process of development. By the time the country became independent, it had several parties competing with each other, although the Indian national Congress had an imposing presence. Congress is the oldest party in Asia, and older than several other parties in the West. The Communist party of India was older than other such parties in Asia and by the time India became Independent it had branches in most of the States. The socialists too had wide networks during the freedom struggle. For a long time they worked as groups inside the Congress. They formed separate parties soon after Independence. Several of the present-day Janata or socialist parties claim that socialist legacy. Parties such as the Shiromani Akali Dal, National Conference, Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Dravida Kazhagam, etc. that emerged during the 20s, 30s and 40s could capture power in the 60s and later. By the time the first general elections were held, India was vibrant with several political parties, articulating different standpoints and competing for power. 53 political parties participated in the first General Elections, although most of them vanished within a decade or reappeared in new incarnations later.

The evolution of parties and party system in India after Independence may be viewed broadly as consisting of four phases, with each phase having its genesis in the earlier one and flowing into the next one: period of Congress consolidation and dominance (1952-67); consolidation of opposition parties and emergence of multi-party system (1967-89); period of flux (1989-98); shaping of coalitional party system (1998-2004). It has now become conventional to begin any discussion on political parties in India with the emergence of the Congress dominance during the 1950s and its breakdown during the 60s and 70s. The factors that helped Congress party to assume the role of a dominant ruling party in the wake of independence and consolidate itself, are well known. With partition, the main rival to the Congress, the Muslim league, was removed from the electoral scene. Electoral politics that replaced the politics of freedom struggle had severely constricted the space available to non-Congress parties earlier. Relatively weak as they were when compared to the Congress during the freedom struggle, they were further rendered feeble under the first past the post electoral system followed in India. It enabled the Congress to gain two- thirds majority in the legislatures. The multiplicity of parties and the presence of large number of independents enhanced the chances of victory for the Congress. Thus the presence of other parties in legislatures was much below their popular support. As the Congress eclipsed the non- Congress liberal parties, those who aspired to continue in politics had to seek space within the Congress fold. Its ability to

use the nationalist movement's organisational network, to mobilise political support and at the same time permit dissenting elements to organise themselves into oppositional factions within the party led to the Congress dominance.

Congress enjoyed exclusive control over governmental power at the Centre and in most of the States. Either the pre-Independence non-Congress parties or the newly emerged parts could present a viable alternative to the Congress. India thus produced a 'one-party dominance' model, which is different from one-party system. Much of the focus of political commentators and researchers in those days was naturally centred round the functioning of the Congress party (Kothari, 1964; Morris-Jones, 1964; Kochanek, 1968). They spoke of its accommodative and integrative nature the consolidation of the Congress and the weak opposition led to a belief that the Congress system was invincible. However, the beauty of democracy lies in its ability to provide ground for the working out of the opposition to the dominant idea or institution. Alongside the blossoming of the Congress dominance, we notice the sprouting of the second phase. New opposition parties began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s. Several leaders within the Congress, who were either disgruntled with the policies of the party or denied access to power went out of it and formed separate parties – Socialist parties, Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP), Krishikar Lok Party (KLP), Bangla Congress, Kerala Congress, Jana Congress in Orissa, Swatantra, Bharatiya Kranti Dal, etc. Other parties, rooted in long-standing anti-Congress orientations, also began to gain strength: SAD in Punjab, Muslim League in Kerala, DMK in Tamil Nadu, National Conference in Jammu & Kashmir, etc. The Communist party too split on the question on support to the Congress party and those who took a vehement anti-Congress position, saying that defeat of the Congress was necessary for the advancement of people's democracy in the country, formed the CPM in 194, which within in three years became the ruling party in Bengal and Kerala. If the 50s saw the consolidation of the Congress, the late 60s and 70s saw the consolidation of the non-Congress, although the Congress retained power at the Union level in the 1967 election, the party citadels began crumbling in several States. Opposition parties forged alliances and formed governments in eight major Indian States. Biju Patnaik, who formed the Utkal Congress in 1970, advocated the theory that future belongs to provincial parties which championed the hopes and aspirations of the people of their respective regions. Visions of a federal government comprising representatives from different States began to appear on the political horizon. For the first time since independence the Congress suffered massive defections, as Congress leaders who were dissatisfied have other parties to look to. Several political scientists ably captured the emerging situation. Rajni Kothari spoke of the dominant party model giving way to a more differentiated structure of party competition (1967b). Morris-Jones (1978) emphasised that the new situation brought a number of opposition parties fully into the market place, and competition that had previously occurred within the Congress was now brought into the realm of inter-party conflict.

The emergence of a viable non-Congress party and its capturing of power at the Centre raised the hope of a two-party system taking shape. But this experiment soon fizzled out with leadership quarrels in the Janta party. After a gap of nine years the non-Congress parties once again came to power in 1989, under the banner of national Front. But it too collapsed within two years. The leaders of these parties, although very experienced and talented, were unable to work out a broad programme to aggregate political groups and to overcome the deep-seated party identities as they were embroiled in suicidal power intrigues. Thus, the non-Congress alliance was unable both the times to consolidate the significant support it received from the electorate and continue in power. However, the Janta and National Front experiments proved that it was possible to displace the Congress if the non-Congress parties could come together. The 1980s was period of great flux. It saw the emergence of more and more new parties. Several National and regional parties were born as the Janta party began to fall apart. Some old parties took a new avatar, Such as the BJP (formed in 1980), which began to gain strength as the major opposition to the Congress at the national level and in some States. The Bahujan Samaj Party began to take shape in e North as the representative of the dalits. New regional parties sprouted, developed and captured power in States: such as the TDP (1983P in AP and the AGP (1985) in Assam. As a result of reconfiguration of

politics numerous small parties began to gain strength or emerge: All India Muslim league (1948), Shiv Sena (1966), Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (1972), Manipur People's Party, Mizo National Front (1965), J&K Panthers party, Nagaland People's party, Nagaland People's Council, Sikkim Sangrama Parishad, Indian People's Front, etc. Due to the fragmentation of major regional parties different splinter parties of SAD, DEMK (the Anna DMK in 1972), Republican Party of India and Kerala Congress began to appear. The united Front experiment through which the left, regional and minor parties came to the centre stage of Indian politics and were called upon to play an important role in running the government heralded new patterns of party competition. The pluralistic nature of India's federal polity began to assert itself in the party domain. Suddenly we found how dependent national parties are on regional and small parties. From a time when the term regional party was considered not a very respectable one (often they were described as parochial parties), now they are much sought after. From a time when the national parties dictated the State leaders and changed the chief ministers at will, the regional parties now decided who the prime minister should be. They gained a voice in national politics. They demanded for a more federal government and more autonomy to the States.

Firstly, the nature of development and the policies pursued by the government during three decades of independence saw the emergence of new political forces. The rise of the aspiring political elites from among the intermediate peasant communities as one major factor that added to the dynamism of state politics has been highlighted by Paul Brass in the context of Uttar Pradesh. This is true of most States. Although this process began much earlier in the southern States, this did not come to the fore for some time as the Congress party accommodated the elites from peasant communities. The strategy of the Congress party in 1950s to enlist the support of the leaders from the intermediate peasant communities to oppose communists and socialists led to the Congress consolidation in some States. With Mrs. Gandhi's attempts to reduce her dependence on the prominent leaders in States due to her experience during 1967-69, to undercut the leaders in States by resorting to populist politics and attempts to directly communicate with the masses, disenchantment set in among those who began to exercise power in their regions. As a result of the popularisation of democracy and superimposition of leaders on State units by Mrs. Gandhi, people who belonged to the intermediate castes began to look for non-Congress parties where they offered a viable alternative to the Congress or formed new parties.

The left parties profess Marxism-Leninism as their ideology. Most other parties simply call themselves as socialist, secular and democratic. Although one may distinguish these parties according to their relative distance from an imaginary centre, it is difficult to identify whether a party is ideological, pragmatic and personality based. In some parties all these things go together, say the NCP or the BSP. Secondly, the extent to which ideology plays a role in the formation of a party and its functioning is often debatable.

The nationalist movement and the different perceptions for the attainment of independence provided the broad framework for the ideologies of political parties in the country. Nationalism, socialism, secularism and democracy became the main planks of the Congress during the last leg of the freedom struggle (say from 1920s) and remain so till now. We also see a tendency during the nationalist movement to emphasise the need to forge a new nationalist identity based on the rejuvenated Hindu values and thought, although the meaning of the term Hindu is always prone to multiple interpretations. The communists wanted to unite the freedom struggle with social revolution leading to the establishment of the rule of the proletariat and peasantry guided by Marxism-Leninism. Thus we see three broad ideological tendencies during the formative years of political parties in India – an eclectic ideology based on socialism and secularism, the Hindutva ideology and the Marxist ideology. Of course there were parties based on religious identities, such as the Muslim League and the SAD which visualised religious communities as separate political entities. To begin with there were ideological differences within the Congress party, with people holding what are called rightist, centrist and leftist positions. Those individuals and parties outside the Congress took positions on one side or the other of the ideological

tendencies inside the Congress. Thus, much of the inner debates in the non-Congress parties till 1967 were about the character of the Congress party and how to align with one or the other of the tendencies inside it. Those who proclaimed their opposition to the Congress policy of giving a big role to the state in regulating, directing and changing the national economy and raising the public sector to the commanding heights came out of the Congress and founded the Swatantra party in 1959. They advocated the end of what they called the license-quota-permit raj. Swatantra party could be the only party in India that stood for a kind of liberal, rather libertarian, ideology on the Indian soil. But such an experiment soon fizzled out. Probably the libertarian principles do not suit Indian culture or the country was not yet ripe for this liberal group to strike roots.

The most vigorous opposition to the Congress on the basis of ideology came from the communists. Soon after independence, they waged an armed struggle in some parts of the country to overthrow the Indian state, although they soon gave up that course and participated in the first general election. The ideological debates on the character of the Indian state, path to revolution in India, and strategy and tactics led to several splits in the communist party. However, their participation in elections and success in forming and running governments at the State level firmly placed them in the arena of parliamentary politics. India is the only country in the world where a communist party could come to power through parliamentary means and control governments within capitalist state. But the sailing was not easy in the initial years. The dismissal of the communist government led by E.M.S. Namboodiripad in 1959 sparked a bitter struggle between the CPI and the Congress.

Interestingly, the inner party debates on the character of the Indian state and revolution in the undivided CPI got entwined with the controversy on the character of the Congress party and cooperation with it. In the process, a major section of the CPI coved closer to the Congress to form a united front with it. The other section took a hostile attitude, which formed the CPM in 1964.

The rise of the BJP and the strategies it adopted to augment its electoral base became an important theme in the study of political parties in India in recent years. The attempt of the BJP to forge unity among the Hindus based on the fears that the Indian State and political leaders, especially that of the Congress, were indulging in policies and programmes to appease the Muslims and that the Hindu culture and religion are in the danger of getting marginalized paid rich political dividends (Singh, 2004; Hansen, 1999; Malik and Singh, 1995; Graham, 1993). Christophe Jaffrelot (1993) thinks that as a result of the awakening of a Hindu sense of vulnerability and communalisation of politics under the auspices of the Congress, the BJP during the 1980s returned to militant strategies and could efficiently implement them. Militant Hindu identity was once again refashioned through a strategy of stigmatisation and emulation of the "threatening other." During the 1990s it played down its earlier elitist, Brahmanical image in favour of militant nationalism. It kept the momentum by combining ethno-religious mobilisation with appeals to sectional interests. Yogendra Yadav and Palshikar have been analysing the emerging trends in India's party domain by relation them to the rise of the BJP. 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 the BJP the consolidate (Yadav, 1999; Palshikar, 2004). There is also a pragmatic dimension to the BJP. Oliver Heath (1999) has argued that the rapid political and geographical expansion of the BJP and its emergence as 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.

In the working of parties, caste, religion, language and region also have acquired ideological overtones. Religion has been an active element in party domain before and after Independence. Today we have parties that claim to represent the interests and culture of specific religions. Origins of some of these parties can be traced to the pre-Independence period. The Muslim league during the freedom struggle instilled in the minds of Indian Muslims that they constitute a separate political community (quam). Islam and Urdu provided the two distinguishing marks. Their position as minority and the rise of Hindu

communalism in the North made some Muslim elites to capitalise on their sentiments. But after the partition, a large number of Muslims remained in India, constituting a large chunk of world's Muslim population. The Muslim League was revived in 1948, although there were splits in it later. The AIMIM in AP is the continuation of the Majlis of the Nizam period. Mainly based in the Hyderabad city, it almost exclusively appeals to the Muslims of the State.

In Punjab, the rise of the Shiromani SAD had its roots in religion and its membership is restricted to Sikhs only. In Sikhism religion and politics seem to be inextricably united. The leaders of the SAD believe the Sikhs constitute a separate political community (the panth). The Akal Takht is the highest seat of religious and political authority for the Sikhs. The SAD Successfully carried out a campaign for a Punjabi Suba (separate State for Sikhs) that excluded the Hindi-speaking areas where the Hindus were in preponderant numbers, and include areas where the Sikhs were in a majority. In the 70s and 80s it carried out a militant struggle for Khalistan, a separate nation-state for the Sikhs. The struggle for Khalistan showed how powerful the religious ideology would be and how that sways leaders and followers. But SAD was never a united party, as it saw successive internecine factional struggles. There are Christian parties too in the country, as in Kerala.

The Victory of the Janta party could be seen as the reassertion of middle segment once again. When the Janta experiment failed, these sections extended support to the regional formations. And thus we see in the 1980s the emergence of several regional parties. Of course, this did not take a uniform pattern in the entire country. Situation varied from State to State. Pradeep Chibber (1999a and 1999b) took the view that the rise of opposition parties and the electoral decline of the Congress party was not a result of the mobilisation of new social groups but rather was due largely to the elements of its coalition that had once supported it now opted for different parties. Party system change, especially the anchoring of political parties in social cleavages, was not due to exogenous social changes, such as demographic shifts or the emergence of new issues, but rather was endogenous to party competition. The replacement of one-party dominant system by state-specific parties was explained as resulting from pre-existing social cleavages that are state specific. However, we cannot ignore how and in what ways the pre-existing social cleavages get articulated and crystallised into parties. The emergence of the SAD in Punjab, Lok Dal in UP, DMK in Tamil Nadu, the regional parties in the North-East, etc. could be attributed to the mobilisation of latent social and primordial identities onto the political arena.

### **Conclusion:**

However, after the 1980s, attempts were made in some States, especially in Bihar and UP, to forge parties mainly on the basis of overwhelming support from certain castes. With the emergence of an urban middle class among the lower castes, largely due to the state policies of land reforms, reservations in education and employment, consolidation of horizontal identities among them and given their numerical strength, the elites from these castes broke away from the catch-all parties and formed caste-specific parties to stake their claim for power. How do these shifts actually take place and how does one party eat into other's support base could be interesting themes for study. The Mandal and the anti-Mandal agitations brought this issue to the fore in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The rise of the BSP, with a solid support from the dalits and that of the SP in UP, the Samata and RJD in Bihar, the PMK and Puthiya Tamilagam in Tamil Nadu can be understood in this context (Kanchan Chandra, 2004; Verma, 2004; Jaffrelot, 2003; Pai, 2002). They could come to power on their own or in alliance with others. The decline of the Congress in UP and Bihar was mainly attributed to the walking out of various caste groups from the Congress fold in favour of caste-based parties, such as the SP, BSP, RJD, and the BJP. While the BSP advocates the establishment of a dalit-bahujan state by ending the manuvadi state, the SP and RJD stand for strengthening social justice. As each of these parties – the BSP, SP, BJP, and the RJD – walked away with a slice of the rainbow coalitional structure of the Congress, it became mutilated and got marginalized (Yadav, 1999). It is not surprising that leaders with a socialist background were in the forefront of organising the social justice parties.

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