Research Paper

Changing Contours of India's Party Politics: Insights from the British Party System

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ABSTRACT: India's party politics has been in a flux for the last three decades. The first forty-two years of independence saw unparalleled dominance by the Congress Party at the national level. This ended in 1989 and the subsequent transformation has been credited to the effect of social changes arising out of Mandir, Mandal, and Market politics. Manylabelled the post 1989 Indian political system as the era of coalitions. It was theorized that India had moved away from a one-party dominant system to a multiparty system. This appeared true with the emergence of strong regional parties in many parts of the country and the inability of major national parties to even come close to forming a majority government of their own. However, the unexpected scale of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections has raised serious questions about this assumption. While BJP's victory in 2014 was expected, very few political analysts anticipated that the party would be able to form a majority government of its own at the centre. BJP's subsequent victories in states like the Uttar Pradesh (2017), Assam (2016), Maharashtra (2014), and Gujarat (2017) have given rise to the perception thatIndia's party system is moving once again towards a one-party dominant system with the BJP as the new ascendant party. In this context, this article explores the reasons for BJP's ascendancy and undertakes a comparative analysis of recent developments in India's party system with that of the United Kingdom by examining the role played by social cleavages in both the countries in accordance with the ideas put forward by French theorist Maurice Duverger.
KEYWORDS: India's Party System, British Party System, Social Cleavages, Cultural Nationalism, Elections

I.   INTRODUCTION

India's party politics at the national level has been in a flux for the last three decades. The first forty-two years of independence saw unparalleled dominance by the Congress Party at the national level. This led some scholars tolabel the Indian party system as the Congress System (Kothari 1964). In hindsight, it is abundantly clear that the dominance of the Congress Party ended in 1989. Even though the Congress party managed to be in power for 15 years post 1989 as well, i.e., from 1991 to 1996 and subsequently from 2004 to 2014, the party never could form a majority government of its own. Its grip on state level elections also greatly weakened during the same period. This transformation has been credited to the effect of social changes arising out of Mandir, Mandal, and Market politics (Nanda 2015). Many scholars have labelled the post 1989 Indian political system as the era of coalitions as only coalition governments could come to power at the centre. It was therefore theorized that India had moved away from a one-party dominant system to a multiparty system. This appeared to be true with the emergence of strong regional parties in many parts of the country and the inability of major national parties to even come close to forming a majority government of their own.

However, the unexpected scale of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections has raised serious questions about this assumption. While BJP's victory in 2014 was expected due to powerful anti-incumbency against the preceding Congress Party led coalition government, very few political analysts anticipated that the party would be able to form a majority government of its own at the centre. BJP's subsequent victories in states like the Uttar Pradesh (2017), Assam (2016), Maharashtra (2014), and Gujarat (2017) have given rise to the perception that India's party system is moving again towards a one-party dominant system with the BJP as the new ascendant party. In this context, this article explores the reasons for BJP's ascendancy and undertakes a comparative analysis of recent developments in India's party systemwith that of the United Kingdom. It examines the changing nature of social cleavages in India to derive a few tentative insights about the emerging contours of India's party politics. The article is divided into four sections. The first section discusses some of the theoretical elements which will be used in the subsequent analysis and explains the rationale behind choosing the United Kingdom's party system for comparison. The second section examines

how social cleavages in India played out till 2014, starting from the pre 1989 Congress System to the subsequent coalition era party politics. The third section discusses the post 2014 emergence of BJP at the national level and evaluates the changing dynamics of social cleavages which facilitated the same. The final section briefly compares India's emerging party system with the British system in order to flush out some key insights. This is followed by a conclusion which discusses future possibilities of research in light of the main arguments put forward in this article.

II.   PARTY SYSTEMS AND SOCIAL CLEAVAGES

Comparative Political Theorists have provided rich theoretical perspectives to analyse and understand a country's party system. Maurice Duverger, a French political theorist, famously argued that the party system of a country is influenced greatly by two factors – (i) the nature and number of social cleavages present in that country and (ii) the type of electoral system followed in that country (Duverger 1964). Duverger theorized that if there are more reinforcing social cleavages in a country as opposed to cross cutting social cleavages, then the number of viable political parties in that country will be less. On the other hand, if there are more cross cutting social cleavages in a country, the number of viable political parties can be greater. Thus, if a country has people of two religions, who belong chiefly to two separate respective economic classes, and are different ethnically, it is an example for a country with reinforcing social cleavages. Therefore, one party is enough to represent each of those religious groups as their class and ethnic identity are all the same. On the other hand, if a country has people of two religions but people of both religions belong to different classes, and have different ethnic identities, it is an example for a country with cross cutting social cleavages. Many parties might be needed to represent the different cross cutting social cleavages in such a scenario as class, ethnic, and religious differences among people have to be represented politically. This is how social cleavages impact the number of political parties in a country, but it is not the only factor. Duverger theorized that the type of electoral system of a country also plays an influential part. Countries with Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system are likely to have a greater number of parties as even smaller minorities tend to get representation in the legislature under such a system (Amy 1995). On the other hand, countries with First Past the Post System tend to have lower number of political parties. In this fashion, Duverger argued that the party system of a country is a result of the interplay between the nature of its social cleavages and the type of its electoral system (Duverger 1964).

In such a context, this article wants to examine the role of social cleavages in the changing dynamics of India's party system. It is for this reason that the comparison is being made with the United Kingdom because both India and the United Kingdom have a similar electoral system, i.e., a first past the post system (Norris 1995). India and the United Kingdom are also both parliamentary democracies. Despite that, the United Kingdom can be categorized as a stable two-party system with the Conservative Party and the Labour Party being the two poles, while India presents a much more complicated picture as noted earlier (Lipson 1953). With the electoral system being similar in both countries, explanations of this difference have to be sought in the nature of social cleavages, which is what makes the United Kingdom a suitable country for comparison as the goal of this article is to examine the role of social cleavages in India's party politics.

III.   PARTY POLITICS OF PRE-2014 INDIA

India is a country of cross cutting social cleavages. People of India have crossing cutting differences based on several factors which includes religious, linguistic, regional, class, and caste factors (Seshia 1998). Therefore, this alone might have led to a multiparty political system in India. However, the presence of a first past the post electoral system meant that smaller parties were not viable, especially at the national level. Till 1989, the Congress Party operated as a typical 'Big Tent' party by bringing together people of different identities and priorities. This was helped initially by the fact that the Congress Party had led the Indian freedom struggle against British Colonialism which gave it tremendous political currency and legitimacy (Candland 1997). In the 1970s, Indira Gandhi moved the party to the economic left and thereby aligning the Congress Party with the working classes. However, this did not change the basic nature of the Congress Party as the business class in India at that point of time was largely negligible as India was following a 'socialistic pattern of society', inspired by Nehruvian ideas (Rao 1987). The Congress Party continued to operate as a 'big tent' party and with no viable national opposition in sight, the Congress Party could even recover from imposing an emergency from 1975 to 1977 when the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democracy itself. India was thus having a classic one-party dominant party system which was aptly dubbed as the Congress System by many.

However, political currents started to shift in the 1980s, especially after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. As noted earlier, this is widely credited to have happened due to the social effects of Mandir, Mandal, and Market politics (Nanda 2015). The Ram Janmabhoomi movement had gathered steam in the mid-1980s, eventually leading to the emergence of the BJP as a serious challenger to the Congress Party, especially in the Hindi heartland states (Panikkar 1993). The Mandal politics had led to the rise of political consciousness among the backward castes in the country, leading to emergence of several regional caste-based parties

(Jaffrelot 2000). This also ate into the traditional strongholds of the Congress Party, further eroding its dominance. Further, in the 1990s, India started liberalizing its economy, in line with international trends in a post-Soviet world. This also led to political realignments and proved to be especially chaotic in the first decade. All these dramatic changes in the post 1989 Indian political system meant that no single party could come to power with a majority of its own at the national level from 1989 to 2014. One can argue that the cross cutting social cleavages became more important for people during this period. Also, the decline of Congress Party's big tent politics meant that no single party could bring together a governing coalition of its own. As a result, India's party politics during this period can be categorized as a kind of multiparty system, or era of coalition politics, as many commentors called it (Ziegfeld 2012). It was generally thought that this was irreversible, and some argued that the complexity of India's cross cutting cleavages would not permit another one-party dominant period to emerge in India. The 2014 elections may have proved this assumption wrong.

IV. PARTY POLITCS OF INDIA: 2014 TO PRESENT

The scale of BJP's victory in the 2014 elections smashed the coalition hypothesis about India's party system. It showed that a single party can come to power on its own in India. One needs to understand how this happened. Has BJP also become a 'big tent' party? In a way, the answer to this question is yes, but it needs further elaboration. The big tent of the Congress Party was a result of its role in the freedom struggle and the advantage of being seen for a long time as the inevitable ruling party of India. However, the big tent of BJP stems from its ideology of cultural nationalism which draws from the Hindu civilizational identity (Seshia 1998). Admittedly, this may exclude some, but BJP has sought to construct a big tent of cultural nationalism within which caste, regional, and linguistic differences may be subsumed. This strategy has been extremely successful in the Hindi heartland states, but its appeal can be seen in other parts of the country as well where BJP has made significant progresses.

As a result of BJP's cultural nationalist big tent strategy, the Congress Party's vote share has reduced considerably in many parts of the country as the Congress Party could not unveil a countervailing big tent strategy. Its earlier strength built on its pivotal role in freedom struggle nostalgia has been fading with every passing decade. Similarly, many regional parties which are based on one or more specific social cleavages also find it difficult to compete with BJP's cultural nationalist big tent strategy, especially at the national level. This is in line with the expectations from Duverger's law (Dobell 1986). India's electoral system, being a first past the post system, encourages lesser number of viable parties. The coalition era from 1989 to 2014may turn out to be nothing but a transitional period between the decline of one big tent party, i.e., the Congress Party to the rise of another, i.e., the BJP. One-party dominant system has been the norm for much of India's political history and may be the country's party system has returned to the norm with the coalition era being a mere outlier, an exception. However, these conclusions are tentative and suggestive rather than definitive as 2014 was just one election.Much will depend on the results of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections as that will indicate and confirm any larger trend. Still, this analysis helps to pinpoint what to look out for in the results of the 2019 elections.

V. INSIGHTS FROM THE BRITISH PARTY SYSTEM

The United Kingdom also has a similar electoral system as India, and it is also a country with cross cutting social cleavages. Yet, the United Kingdom has a stable two-party system with the Conservative Party and the Labour Party alternating power between them for the last several decades (Lipson 1953). How did this come about and what might be preventing the emergence of such a two-party system in India? Contrary to popular notions, India has never had a two-party system. Before 1989, it was only the Congress Party that could come to power on its own and post 1989, it was a coalition system.Post 2014, it seems like only the BJP can come to power on its own. Therefore, India never had a stable two-party system in its political history. While it might be too early to declare a BJP led one-party dominant system, it is clear that India never had a two-party system like that of the United Kingdom or the United States.A brief examination of why this might be by comparing with the British political system offers some useful insights.

In the British political system, both the leading parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party are big tent parties with opposing ideologies. The Conservative Party is an economically right-wing big tent party with a socially conservative agenda and the party seeks to appeal to all sections of society even though they have a core constituency. The Labour Party on the other hand is an economically left-wing big tent party with a socially progressive agenda and seeks to appeal to all sections of society, with the working class being its core constituency. As a result of this structure, other social cleavages apart from class and social values get subsumed within these two broad tents, leading to a relatively stable two-party system. There is not really any political space left for another 'big tent' party and therefore other parties find themselves in the margins of power in the United Kingdom.

In the case of India, during the period of Congress System till 1989, no other party could rival the big tent of the Congress Party, especially at the national stage. This meant that other parties found themselves in the

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margins of power at the national level. For a two-party system to emerge, two rival parties with two rival broad enough big tent ideologies need to exist in a political system. These big tent ideologies need to be able to subsume some of the cross cutting social cleavages in the society. During the Congress System till 1989, the nostalgic love for the Congress Party and the charisma of the Nehru-Gandhi family left no such space for any other political party to emerge. The Mandir, Mandal, and Market dynamics broke this framework, leading to new possibilities, combinations, and permutations. In such a scenario, BJP's resounding victory in 2014 may be is an indication of the emergence of a big tent ideology party based on cultural nationalism. As noted earlier, this is a tentative assumption and subsequent Lok Sabha elections need to be evaluated to validate this trend. However, if that indeed turns out to be the case, then for a two-party system to emerge another party with a rival, and opposing big tent ideology capable of subsuming some social cleavages need to emerge. The Congress Party of the old might not be suitable for this challenge as the earlier paradigm has changed in the last few decades. There is very little nostalgic love for the Congress Party and the charisma of Nehru-Gandhi family has also worn off to a great extent. If the Congress Party or any other party wants to be a big tent national party, it may need to reinvent itself and provide an appealing opposing framework to the BJP. To date, there are no signs of any such party emerging in India's party politics. In fact, even conceptualization of a coherent opposing big tent ideology to BJP's big tent cultural nationalism has not happened so far. It might also be the case that there is simply no political space left for one more big tent ideology party in the Indian polity. However, it is likely safe to argue that a big tent party can rarely be challenged by a bunch of smaller parties coming together, especially in the case of India as is evident in its political history. Therefore, if these assumptions turn out to be true, then it might be difficult for other political parties of the country to challenge the BJP in 2019 Lok Sabha elections and even beyond. The country might once again be in a one-party dominant system. Having said that,it remains to be seen in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and subsequent elections what shape India's party system will eventually take.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article explored the changing contours of India's party politics by examining it from a historical perspective using Duverger's ideas about the role of social cleavages as the anchor. India's political system tend to gravitate towards a one-party dominant system. This is of course greatly influenced by our first past the post electoral system and the nature of our country's social cleavages. While it is not clear whether BJP's resounding victory in 2014 is an aberration from coalition politics or an emerging norm, it is clear that it necessitates scholars to rethink their assumptions about India's party system. This article contributes some insightful perspectives in this regard. However, future elections will need to be studied along the lines detailed in this article to validate some of the speculative ideas put forward in this article.

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