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Party System and Democracy in India

Distinctive Features at the National, State and Local Level

SANDEEP SHASTRI

A: Introducing the Theme

A survey of the working of Indian democracy since independence indicates the emergence of a few select trends: the democratic process has gained deeper roots and there is a clear expansion of the democratic space (SDSA Report 2008, Yadav and Palshikar 2009b, Yadav et.al. 2011), there is sharper and more focussed electoral competition (Shastri, Suri and Yadav 2009), impact of coalitions on the working of parliamentary democracy (Shastri 1999, 2001), the emerging centrality of the role of the States in the Indian federal process and critical to the entire process, a transformation in the nature of party competition/politics (Mehra and Kueck 2003, Shastri 2010).

The nature of the party system in India is intricately linked to the developments in Indian politics over time. Till the national elections of 1977, the country saw a near one party domination at the national level. For three decades, the Indian National Congress' not only monopolized power at the national/central level it was also the dominant political player in most of the states. Cracks in the Congress control over power were first seen in 1967, when it was defeated in the assembly elections in many of the states of the country. This signalled the rise of a competitive party system in the states. In 1977, when it was voted out of power, it tasted its first defeat at the national level only to bounce back to power in three years (1980) with a decisive electoral victory at national level. It remained in power for close to

a decade (till late 1989). Since 1989, at the national level, the country has seen only coalition governments or minority governments involving different political formulations.

The end of Congress domination over Indian politics was essayed by a range of factors. Its leadership traces its origins to the freedom struggle. Post-independence it transformed itself into a political power competing for power in an electoral democracy. With the passage of time it was natural that rival parties emerged to challenge its claim to power. The Congress itself was witness to several splits with influential leaders leaving the party and forming their own parties either due to ideological differences or personality clashes. During the years of the freedom struggle and in the first decades after independence, the Congress was seen by many as a rainbow coalition of different social groups. With increasing competition for power and distribution of benefits of office, this social coalition got weakened. The broad social base of the Congress began to erode and new political formulations began to represent specific social interests. A linked development was the rise of state based parties as a direct opposition to the Congress party. The polity has thus, transited from a one party dominant system to a competitive multi-party system with the developments of the early 1990s. This development is also a reflection of the changing dynamics of party politics at the state level. Many would argue that the political events of the last two decades are clearly an assertion of state rights and the states are today at the centre of Indian politics.

In this context, this paper – tentative in its formulations and limited in its sweep – attempts to link the emerging party system in India to the wider dynamics of democratic politics in the country. The paper also makes a distinction between the nature of party competition and the party system at the national level on the one hand and in the states on the other. It argues that given states emerging as the true centre of political engagement, there appears to be a polarization in the party competition at the state level. When aggregated nationally, it creates a competitive multi-party system.

B: The Party System in India at the National level

B.1: An Overview

In India, political parties are classified as national parties, state parties and

registered unrecognized parties by the Election Commission on the basis of their performance in the previous national election or state elections². As per the Election Commission, in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, 7 national parties³, 34 state parties and 322 registered unrecognized parties participated in the elections. As on 1 November 2010, there are 6 national parties, 45 state based parties and 730 registered unrecognized parties in the country. The two main national parties, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lead the two major national alliances. The United Progressive Alliance is led by the Congress and the National Democratic Alliance has the BJP as the main party. The UPA came to power after the 2004 elections. It was once again returned to power in the 2009 polls. Earlier the NDA has been in power from 1998 to 2004.

B.2: Political Parties – A Historical Overview

The party system that developed in India in the three decades after independence (1967-77) was characterized by many as a one party dominant system – the 'Congress system' (Kothari 1994). During this phase, the Indian National Congress monopolized power at the central level and was the dominant player in most of the states. Till the early 1960s, the principal opposition to the Congress came from the Communist Party, a few socialist parties, the pro-privatization Swatantra party, the right wing Jan Sangh and a clutch of state/regional parties. The real challenge to the INC emerged first with the 1967 elections to the state legislative assemblies, when it was defeated in several states. The INC was replaced by non-Congress parties and alliances, many of which were splinter groups of the Congress. This symbolized the first wave of change. The defeat of the INC at the national level in 1977, ushered in a second phase of competitive party politics. Even though the INC tasted defeat at the national level, it continued to be the dominant player in politics and returned to power in 1980. Till in late 1980s, politics in India continued to be characterized as being a competition between the Congress and non-Congress parties.

1989 marks an important watershed in Indian politics. Many would argue that the Lok Sabha elections held in that year ushered in a competitive multi party system at the national level (Suri 2005; Shastri, Suri and Yadav 2009). The developments since the early 1990s have been characterized by many as symbolizing the decline of the Congress (Yadav 1996) and the emergence of

a new trend in party competition with the emergence of the 'third electoral system' (Yadav 2003; Yadav and Palshikar 2009a). Clearly, at the federal level the polity is witness to the emergence of a competitive multi-party system.

A linked development is the increase in voter turnout with the emergence of a competitive party system at the federal level. The 1990s have been characterized as a decade of 'democratic upsurge' (Yadav 2004) with increased participation especially among the socially and economically backward and rural voters. This upsurge seems to have peaked in the mid 2000s with voter turnout in elections being in the range of 60 percent (Palshikar and Kumar 2004; Kumar 2009). Further those groups which witnessed a significant increase in participation in the 1990s now do not seem to demonstrate a significantly different behaviour in terms of voter turnout as compared to other sections of society. Many would argue that this is a result of the dynamics of liberal democratic politics (Yadav and Palshikar 2009a). An issue which will be assessed at length later is the trend of increased voter turnout at elections to the state legislatures as compared to elections to the Lok Sabha (Kumar 2009).

The last election to the *Lok Sabha*, held in 2009, saw the election of representatives from thirty eight different political parties. This number has remained more or less stable over the last four elections (since 1998). The traditional classification of political parties by the Election Commission – national parties, state parties and registered unrecognized parties, on the basis of their vote share across the states of India, does not permit a meaningful analysis of the nature and structure of party competition in Lok Sabha elections.

The post 1989 phase of Indian politics is witness to the end of a one party dominant system and the clear emergence of a competitive party system at the federal level. This is clearly evident both in terms of the number of parties that are represented in the *Lok Sabha* and from the analysis of the vote share of political parties. Post 1989, there has been a significant rise in the number of political parties represented in the *Lok Sabha*. There has been a relative stability in the number of parties that have been characterized as national parties while the total number of state based parties has witnessed a sharp increase (see Figure 5.1). Similarly, the total strength of the representatives

of all national parties has steadily declined with the number of seats occupied by those from state based parties has significantly increased (see Figure 5.2). The vote share of the national parties has declined by around fifteen percentage points and the beneficiaries have been the state based parties. (see Figure 5.3). These trends clearly point out to the emergence of a clear competitive party system at the federal level.

Figure 5.1: National, State and other Recognized Parties in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) 1989-2009

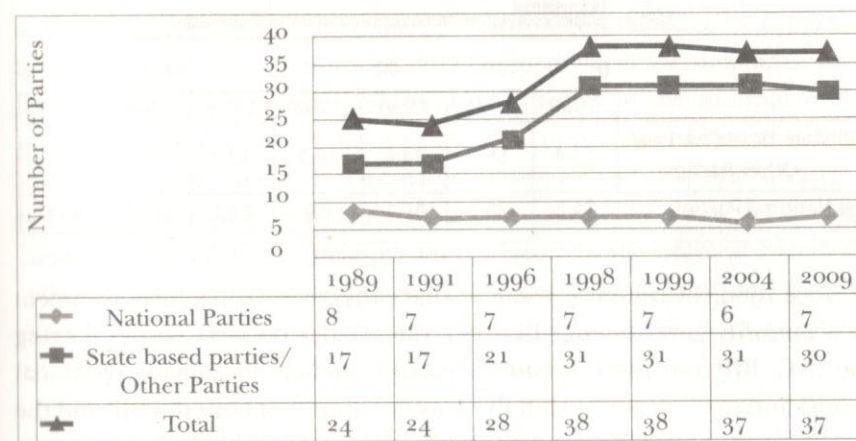


Figure 5.2: Seats Share in the Lok Sabha

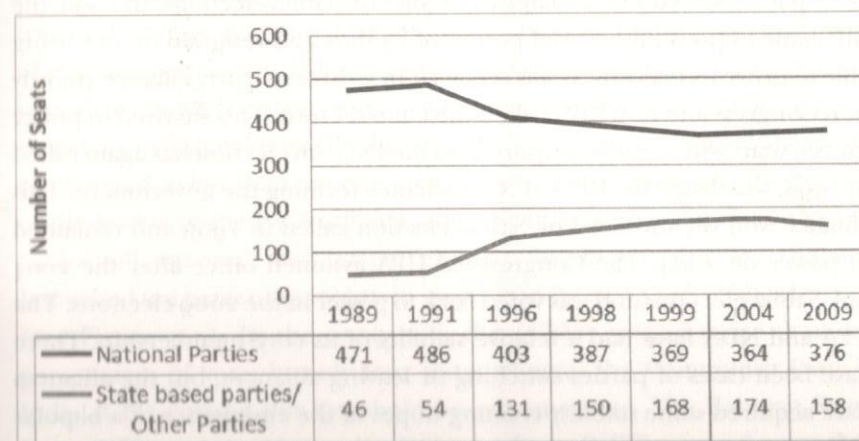
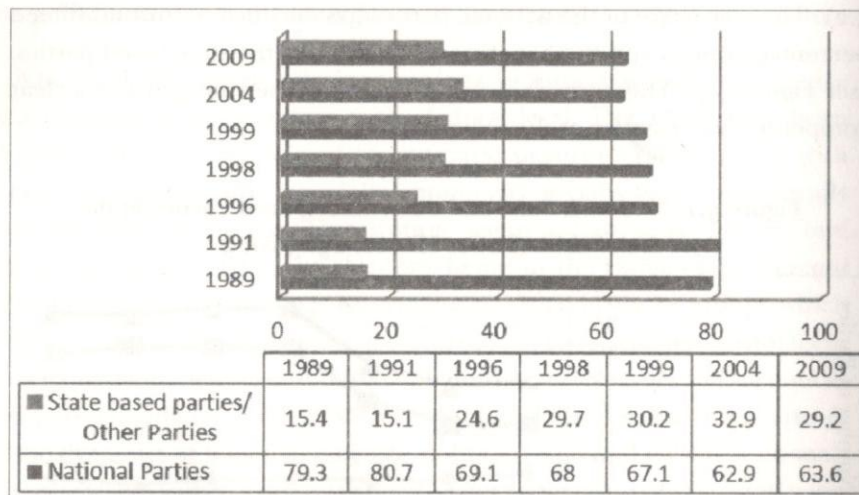


Figure 5.3: Votes Share of National, State and other Recognized Parties in the Lok Sabha: 1989-2009



Since 1989, the central government has either seen a coalition government or a minority government.⁴ In 1989, the smaller political parties barring the INC, BJP and the Communist Parties stitched an alliance (National Front) and came to power with the outside support of both the BJP and the Communists. The alliance did not last long and was replaced by yet another coalition of smaller parties with outside support from the INC. This too was in power for less than a year. In 1991, the INC formed a minority government as no party secured a clear majority in the Lok Sabha elections. In 1996, the BJP came to power for a brief period of 13 days and resigned on not being able to prove its majority. It was replaced by a thirteen party alliance (mostly non Congress and non BJP) called the United Front. This survived in power for two years with outside support from the INC. An election was again called in 1998, which saw the BJP led NDA alliance forming the government. This alliance won yet another Lok Sabha election called in 1999 and remained in power till 2004. The Congress-led UPA assumed office after the 2004 Lok Sabha elections and was voted back to power in the 2009 elections. The UPA and NDA have had a relative stability of its core membership. There have been cases of parties switching or leaving alliances, but the alliances have acquired some stability creating hopes of the emergence of a bi-polar alliance system at the national/central level.

It must be noted that both in the NDA and UPA, save the alliance leader (INC in the case of the UPA and the BJP in the case of NDA) all other political parties in the alliance are state based parties (save the NCP in the case of the UPA). This has also been an important factor responsible for the shift in the 'focus of politics' and 'party competition' from the federal level to the state level.

C: Emergence of a Bi-Polar Alliance System in the States

In the earlier section the narrative focused on the nature of party system at the national level. Two issues raised in that section need to be flagged in any dialogue on the dynamics of party competition at the state level. First, the emergence of a competitive multi party system at the national level is necessarily a by product of the cut and thrust of party politics/competition at the state level. Many commentators have asserted that 'the theatre of politics has shifted to the states' (Yadav and Palshikar 2009a). Second, a large segment of the political parties operating in the political system are today essentially state based parties. This section would assert the fact that every Lok Sabha election in the country in the last decade is a sum total of 28 different electoral verdicts across the states (Shastri 2010).

A review of political party competition and nature of electoral contest also draws attention to the fact that an increasing number of so called Election Commission recognized 'national' political parties have their support base limited to one state or at the most a few states in the country. This is especially true in the phase of competitive multi-party politics. In the post 1998 phase of electoral politics, the INC crossed the threshold of a ten percentage point vote share in all the states only in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. Earlier, especially in bigger states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh its votes share had plummeted to less than ten percentage points (see Figure 5.4). In the case of the leader of the NDA alliance, the BJP, its vote share in the 2009 Lok Sabha poll, was more than ten percentage points in only 18 of the 28 states. It touched ten percentage points in 20 states in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections (see Figure 5.5). In the 2009 poll, the (CPM) gained more than ten percentages of votes in only four states whereas the Communist Party of India (CPI) crossed this threshold in only one state. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) secured more than

Figure 5.4: Vote share of the Congress in Lok Sabha elections – state wise 1989-2009

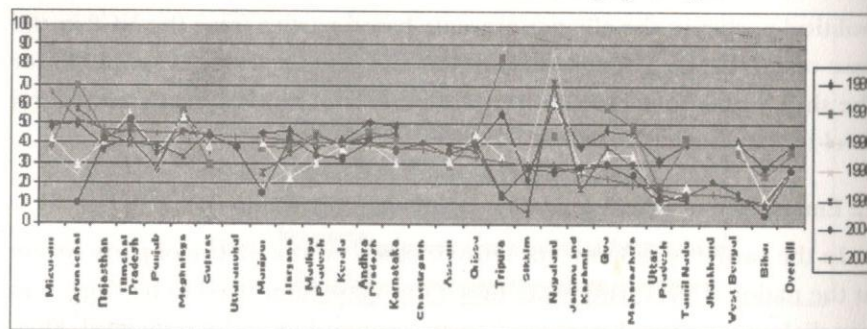
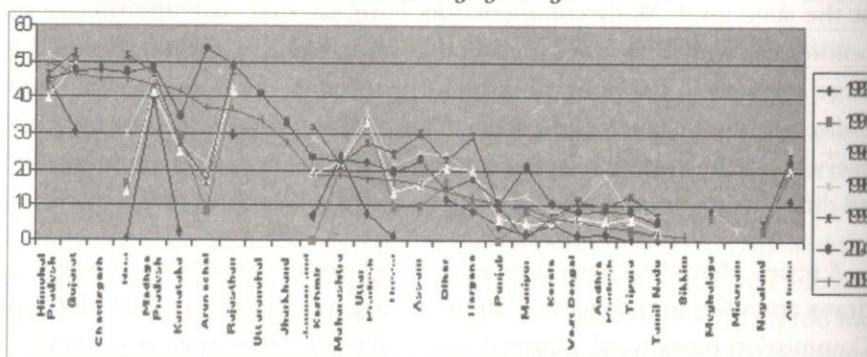


Figure 5.5: Vote share of the BJP in Lok Sabha elections – state wise 1989-2009

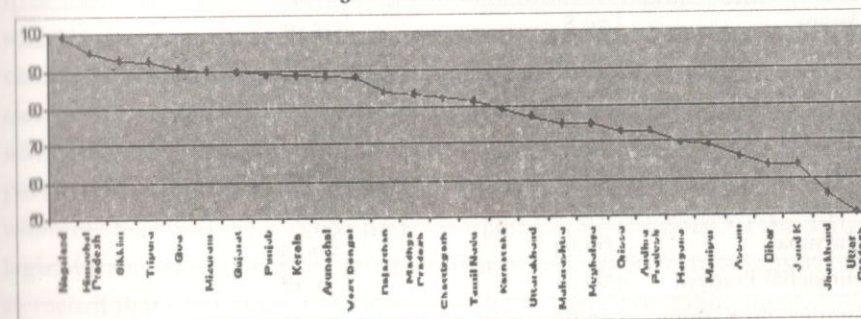


ten percent of votes in merely three states. This raises the question as to whether some of these parties now classified as 'national' are significantly different from those in the list of state parties. It is beyond a shadow of doubt that some of the 'national' parties are major political players in a few states and given the impact of state politics on federal political dynamics, these parties could strongly influence the shape and direction of national politics. Yet their power at the national/central level is linked to their status and political influence in the states.

What appears to have clearly emerged in the recent past is a clear bi-polar alliance system in most of the states. This can be clearly concluded if one looks at the 2009 federal poll as 28 different elections held in 28 different states. In the 2009 Lok Sabha poll, in more than half the states

(15 of the 28) the two major parties/alliances in the electoral contest secured more than eighty percent of the valid votes polled (see Figure 5.6). In another nine states, the two major alliances/parties secured over two thirds of the valid votes polled. In only four states was there a truly multi polar contest at the state level. Thus, the states of India have emerged as the true 'centre' of politics as is clearly evidenced from the bi-polar alliance system that exists in most of the Indian states in a Lok Sabha election.

Figure 5.6: Votes polled by the two major parties/alliances in every state 2009 Lok Sabha elections



Does the typology of political parties assume a different dimension if the elections to the state legislatures is taken into account? It may also be useful to look at the voter turnout in a Lok Sabha election and state elections. Since 1989, in every state, save Bihar, the voter turnout in the state legislature elections has been higher as compared to the voter turnout in the state for a Lok Sabha election (Kumar 2009:48 also see Table 5.7).

A higher level of interest in the politics of the state among voters may reflect the fact that the state governments are more closely linked to the priorities, programmes and policies that have a direct impact on the lives of common people. Stretching the same logic, it could be argued that the highest intensity of participation should be at the local government elections level. This however is not true. The argument here is that the common citizens are aware of the nature of responsibility of the state government and the limited role of the local government in spite of their being accorded a constitutional status. A study undertaken in the early 2000's showed that citizens believed that the state government should be responsible for the delivery of those

public goods considered important by the people (Chhibber, Shastri and Sisson 2004: 339-52).

Table 5.1: Lok Sabha Elections (1989-2009) and State Assembly Elections (1989-2009)

State	Average Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections	Average Turnout in State Assembly Elections
	1989-2009	1989-2009
Andhra Pradesh	67.48	70.63
Arunachal Pradesh	60.18	70.97
Assam	70.8	75.95
Bihar	58.36	55.76
Chhattisgarh	53.69	70.95
Delhi	49.59	55.45
Goa	53.88	68.88
Gujarat	47.69	59.44
Haryana	66.64	69.35
Himachal Pradesh	60.01	71.28
Jammu and Kashmir	37.67	52.73
Jharkhand	53.38	57
Karnataka	63.31	66.84
Kerala	72.77	72.85
Madhya Pradesh	52.79	62.4
Maharashtra	54.88	64.53
Manipur	69.08	89.66
Meghalaya	59.25	78.45
Mizoram	62.91	79.84
Nagaland	77.62	74.78
Orissa	59.59	64.12
Punjab	56.63	58.25
Rajasthan	51.37	62.94
Sikkim	74.09	79.78
Tamil Nadu	63.91	66.04
Tripura	75.8	83.25
Uttar Pradesh	50.27	52.21
Uttarakhand	50.65	58.65
West Bengal	79	79.22

This could also be linked to the fact that the cut and thrust of party politics is more sharply manifest in the states and the electoral choice before the voter is more visibly articulated. At the local level there is greater fluidity in party affiliations (a point to be discussed in a subsequent section) and the same gets more crystallized at the state level.

While analyzing the party competition in the states, Yadav and Palshikar have argued that the state party system is one of competitive convergence (Yadav and Palshikar 2003). They later went on to argue that there appeared to be four major types of party political competition: a) bipolar convergence: wherein the principal contest in elections to the state legislature was between two parties (7 states); b) multiparty-bipolarity: wherein the contest was essentially between two alliances (7 states); c) stable multi-polar convergence: wherein the contest was between more than two effective parties with one party emerging with a stable majority (8 states); d) fluid multi polarity: wherein there was clear multi party competition in elections to the state legislature (4 states) (Yadav and Palshikar 2009b:59-60⁵). It is important to record that even in the last category of states there are stable one party/alliance governments. Looked at from another angle it can be argued that most states have a stable bi-party system or bi-polar alliance system. This can be gleaned from the fact that in 22 of the 28 states, the ruling party/alliance and the principal opposition party/alliance secured over two thirds of the votes in the last state elections. This is a reasonably high percentage of polarization in a FPTP system. It implies that there is a clear polarization of choice that voters make in the state elections.

Within different geographical regions in the country, it is noticed that the trajectory of state politics is significantly different. In the four states of southern India, the Congress is in power in one state (Andhra Pradesh), in another the BJP is the ruling party (Karnataka), in a third a regional ally of the INC is in power (Tamil Nadu) and in the fourth the Left Front is in power (Kerala). Further, during an election to the Lok Sabha, the electoral verdict could significantly differ from state to state within the same geographical region and often involves a response to the government in power at the state level. If the 2009 national elections were to be taken as an example, in 24 of the 28 states, the voters endorsed a majority of the candidates who

hailed from the ruling party/alliance that was in power in that state. In only four states, the candidates of the ruling party did not do so well and this is clearly linked to the unpopularity of the state government in those states. This implies that state party politics has a relative degree of autonomy and the principal stage of contestation is the states.

Across the 28 states, there is a sharing of power among political parties. In twelve of the states, the constituents of the UPA are in power. In seven of these states, the INC (leading party in the INC) has a single party government. Four have a coalition government with a UPA ally (with the ally leading the government in one) and in one state a UPA ally is the ruling party. In another nine states, the parties which are part of the NDA are in power. In six of these states the BJP (leader of the NDA) is in power on its own and in the remaining three it is in a coalition, being the major partner in one and the junior partner with a NDA ally in another two. Between them, the two major national alliances are in power in 21 of the 28 states. In three states the Left alliance is in power, and in four states other political parties are in power.⁶

Two more dimensions linked to the nature of party competition merit attention. State parties and their leaders today play a vital role in national/central politics. In successive national level coalition governments, they have played a major role in the formation of alliances, making a bid for power and in the sharing of power. In the coalition governments of the last two decades, important cabinet portfolios like Finance, Defence, Agriculture, Railways, Industry, Information, Law, Commerce have been held by leaders from powerful state based parties. They have often bargained hard for key portfolios and more often than not had their way. The selection of the representatives of the state based parties in the Union Council of Ministers is today not a prerogative of the prime minister but of the leaders of these state parties.⁷ This has resulted in the greater assertiveness of state based parties while they are part of national/central coalitions.

Another welcome trend is the nature of the party competition has created a legitimate autonomy and political space for the state government/parties. Till the late 1980s, there were several examples of abuse of legitimate constitutional provisions by the central government to undermine the autonomy of states.⁸ This especially happened when a different party or

alliance was in power at the federal and state levels. Since the 1990s, the abuse of constitutional provisions has declined dramatically. This abdication of abuse has little to do with any constitutional amendments but is more linked to the reality of politics. Even within the 'national' parties, the state leaders tend to enjoy much greater autonomy as compared to the past. This is a direct corollary of the locus of power even in 'national' parties being in the states. A recent example of the reluctance of the central government to interfere in the politics of a state was the political developments in Karnataka. The state has a BJP government and the government does not have the best of relations with the Governor. On 4 October 2010, the Governor recommended to the central government to take over the administration of the state in view of the breakdown of constitutional machinery in the state. A Congress led UPA government at the central level decided not to initiate action on the Governors recommendation.

D: Political Parties and their Organizational Structure

While discussing political parties in the wider context of democratic politics it would be useful to make a few preliminary observations about the organizational structure of parties in India. Firstly, though political parties are central to the functioning of electoral democracy, no mention was made of political parties in the original constitutional document. It is only when the Constitution was amended to include a provision to prevent 'defections' that the term political party found mention in the constitution.⁹ A second factor flowing from the first is that there is no comprehensive legislation to regulate the functioning of political parties. A demand for the same has been voiced with varying degrees of assertiveness for quite some time.

The Election Commission of India has attempted to use its implied powers to hold political parties to account. This has however, met with limited success. In order to be registered, a political party needs to approach the Election Commission and fulfil a few formalities including making an undertaking that it would not violate the principles as enshrined in the Constitution. When a political party formally splits, the decision on who will inherit the mantle of the original party is decided by the Election Commission. In the 1990s the Commission took the stand that in order to make this decision on who inherits the name, symbol and status of the original party in the event of a split, it would be mandatory for parties to hold their internal organizational

elections. Given the fact that most positions in political parties were filled by nominations, it became difficult for the Election Commission to take decisions on which group (after a split) authentically represents the original party. The Election Commission thus mandated that political parties need to hold their organizational elections at regular frequency. This directive of the Election Commission has not been taken very seriously by the party leadership. The challenge that political parties face is that most of them do not maintain a well developed and integrated list of members. Save for the cadre based Communist parties, most political parties have a very fluid organizational structure at the base. More often than not, state and district political leaders recruit their followers to the party. Many of them are then willing to switch sides if the leaders change their political affiliation. Given the fact that political parties do not have a well defined organizational base, it essentially is a top-down structure with a hopeless lack of clarity below the district level. In such a situation, organizational elections end up being a farce and often involve a competition between leaders on how many each could enrol. A string of challenges are a natural by product of this development. Two of them merit more detailed attention: firstly, there is near absence of inner party democracy in political parties. The differences among them (political parties), in this regard is only a matter of degree. Secondly, most political parties lack transparency in procedures for selecting candidates for political office and in their fiscal transactions.

The increasing fragmentation of political parties is a direct corollary to the absence of clear organizational procedures and internal democracy. All the major political parties have witnessed several splits during their life time. Many of the 'new' parties of today are splinter groups which have emerged from either national parties or other state based parties. Most major splits in political parties are an expression of dissent against the party leadership as 'exit' seems to be the only honourable option for those who disagree with the party leadership.

Most political parties – both national and state based – prefer to choose the route of nomination of party office bearers by the high command or central leadership of the party. This has serious implications in a federal structure. The "national" parties are highly centralized in their functioning and the high command culture is all pervasive. As a result, the state level units of the

'national' parties enjoy little autonomy and freedom. The state leadership is often sensitive to the 'political cues' from the central leadership of the party. It is quite common in the 'national' parties for the decision on who should be Chief Minister if the party comes to power in a state, to be decided by the central leadership. It must be conceded though that given the shift in the focus of politics from the federal level to the state, the state level party organization of the 'national' parties does have some room for political maneuver as compared to the earlier decades. Yet, the acknowledgement of the supremacy of the 'national leadership' is something that state leaders cannot afford to ignore. The situation is no different in the 'state based' political parties. They too are stifled by a lack of internal democracy. The only difference between them and a 'national' party would be that their central leadership is located in the state itself! This in fact could be even more suffocating as the party supreme is not far away in the national capital but closer home at the state headquarters!

A linked factor is the powerful influence of the personality of individual leaders in shaping the political destinies of parties. The emergence of powerful political dynasties across the political spectrum is seen as an expected consequence. This has also weakened the grass-roots organization of parties. Loyalty of party workers and cadres are not so much to the principles and ideology of the party but personal loyalty to the leader who is often a god-father/mother like figure. Selection of candidates for election to representative bodies is often made by a small coterie of leaders who have the confidence of the top leadership/high command. This explains the frequent violent protests in many political parties at the time of the announcement of the party candidates at a national or state level election. It is not uncommon to find leaders (and their followers) quitting a party on being denied the party ticket and joining *en masse* a rival party simply on the promise of being nominated to contest.

It is thus no surprise that when surveys ask common citizens to rank institutions on the basis of trust, political parties compete for space at the lower end of the spectrum.¹⁰

E: The Impact of Political Parties on Democratic Politics

It needs to be underscored that fundamental transformations in

the dynamics of party politics has been wrought not so much by legal/constitutional reforms and processes but by the stark reality of politics. At one level, the political events of the last two decades have democratized federalism and federalized democracy in significant ways. At another, it has also altered the political landscape and created new spaces for political parties to act and gain greater visibility and credibility.

The politics of the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first century have placed state based parties at the 'table of power' at the central level. No longer are state based parties characterized as having a 'regional vision.' State based parties have the opportunity to enrich the 'national' vision by making it the sum total of 'regional visions.' Their participation in national coalitions, in the last two decades has given them greater visibility and power to define and determine national/central policies.

In contrast, the 'national parties' have increasingly got 'regionalized' and have come to accept (often grudgingly) the reality of their political influence. During the days of a one-party-dominant-system, the INC often did not make the distinction between party and government. Though not consciously done, it had a regressive impact on the working of the federal system.¹¹ The emergence of a competitive party system has arrested that trend. For long, the INC was not willing to accept the fact that it needed to form an alliance with like minded parties to make a meaningful bid for power at the national/central level. Just prior to the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the party accepted this reality which placed it in a more comfortable position to come to power. The BJP's leading the NDA and remaining in power for six years (1998-2004) was again a result of its recognizing the need to accommodate political forces and players. In order to make the alliance possible, the BJP had to place on the back-burner its pet themes.¹² While forming alliances at the state level, the BJP had to be satisfied playing the junior partner in order to consolidate its foothold at the national/central level.

Yadav and Palshikar highlight the fact that 'the emergence of states as real and imagined political communities has intensified political regionalism without weakening the ties with the larger, national unit or suppressing the emergence of sub-regional communities' (Yadav and Palshikar 2009b:52). This maturity reflects a moving forward from the 'federal government

promotes unity and integrity' thesis which defined much of the politics of the early years after independence.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the state leaders matter even in a Lok Sabha election. Graduating from state politics to national politics was seen as a natural process in the political life of a leader. No longer today. Political leaders realize the importance of consolidating their presence at the state level and the leverage it would then provide in national politics. The political career path that Rahul Gandhi, the youth leader of the INC, has chosen to follow is a reflection of this trend.¹³ Chief Ministers of states are today often more important in national/central decision making as compared to those who are ministers at the central level. In both the UPA and NDA, the chief ministers are part of the decision making coterie in view of their political influence and stature. If the 2009 Lok Sabha elections were taken as a site for analysis it is found that in deciding who to vote for, citizens tended to value state leaders much more than the national leaders (Shastri 2009: 88-91).

The changing contours of democratic politics, open a window of opportunity for different political players to use different institutional platforms for more meaningful political bargaining and negotiation. As of now, political parties have not fully grasped the potential of these platforms for ensuring a more fair and equitable distribution of benefits. The Annual Chief Ministers Conference, Departmental Ministers Conference, National Development Council meetings, Inter State Council Meeting and its sub-committees, articulation of the state voice in the *Rajya Sabha* are just a few of these avenues.

G: In Lieu of a Conclusion

The greatest challenge before both political parties is to inject greater democratization in their internal functioning. The absence of processes of internal accountability would make democracy in political process less intense in terms of its content. At the end of the day, democratic politics is not merely about structures... it is about attitudes and ways of thinking. Political parties as key players in the democratic process would be severely handicapped if they do not internalize the values and spirit of democracy – sharing, negotiating and above all multiple centres of power.

A competitive multi-party system has emerged at the federal level with a bi-polar alliance system in most of the states. Its implications for democratic politics could be far reaching. It has catapulted the states to the 'centre' of Indian politics. The emergence of a competitive multi-party system has led to the formation of coalition governments at the federal level over the last two decades. This has necessitated a sharing of power among the major political players.

The party system in India continues to face serious organizational challenges. At the grass-roots, parties have a very weak and fluid structure. This has resulted in a 'top-down' rather than 'bottom-up' organizational and power arrangement. Most political parties are plagued by a lack of internal democracy. As a result, the core leadership of the party is central to decision making within the party. This has resulted in the emergence of influential and powerful political dynasties in most political parties. A natural corollary is the frequent splits in parties largely caused by personality clashes and differences with the leadership. It is thus not surprising, that in the citizen's trust of political institutions, political parties find themselves at one of the lower rungs.

Political parties in India reflect the changing contours of politics across the country. In significant ways the emerging competitive party system is a reflection of the increasingly assertive role that the states have come to play in national/central politics. The centrality of the role of state based parties is also a natural corollary to the dynamics of electoral competition and the deepening of the democratic process. The multi-verse of Indian democracy is truly reflected in the working of political parties and civil society organizations and the nature of challenges that they face in the Indian federal political system.

Notes

- 1 Over the years the party has seen several splits, and the dominant group has had minor changes in its formal nomenclature but is popularly referred to as the Congress party. This paper would refer to it as the Indian National Congress (INC).
- 2 The Election Commission classifies parties in India into National parties, State parties and Registered Unrecognized Parties. A political party needs to register with the Election Commission in order to be accorded recognition. A political

party shall be treated as a recognised National party, if (i) the candidates set up by it, in any four or more States, at the last general election to the Lower House of the federal parliament or the Legislative Assembly at the state level, have secured not less than six percent of the total valid votes polled and (ii) at least four members have been elected to the Lower House of the federal Parliament or (i) its candidates have been elected to the Lower House of the Federal Parliament at the last general elections, from at least two percent of the total number of constituencies in India, any fraction exceeding one-half being counted as one; and (ii) the said candidates have been elected to that Lower house of the Federal Parliament from not less than three States. To be classified as a State Party (A) (i) the candidates set up the party, at the last general election to the Lower House of the Federal Parliament or to the Legislative Assembly of the State legislature concerned, have secured not less than six percent of the total valid votes polled in that State and (ii) in addition, it has returned at least two members to the Legislative Assembly of the State at the last general election; or (i) it wins at least three percent of the total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State, (any fraction exceeding one-half being counted as one), or at least three seats in the Assembly, whichever is more, at the aforesaid general election.

- 3 On 30 July 2010, the Election Commission of India, derecognized the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) as a National Party, reducing the total number of national parties to six.
- 4 The Congress which formed a minority government in 1991 was able to muster a majority in 1994 by ensuring that select members of the lower house of the federal parliament changed their party affiliations and decided to join the Congress party.
- 5 Category (i) Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand; Category (ii) Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa, Bihar, Tripura; Category (iii) Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Jharkhand, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur; Category (iv) Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Haryana, West Bengal
- 6 As on 1 November 2010
- 7 In recent months (April-November 2010) several accusations of corruption and impropriety have been made against Union Ministers. A minister belonging to the INC resigned whereas Ministers who hailed from other parties in the alliance initially refused to resign as they had the backing of the leaders of their parties. They were forced to quit when the political situation left them with no other choice
- 8 Misuse of the office of the Governor, Imposition of Presidents Rule evoking Article 356 can be cited as cases in point.
- 9 52 Constitutional Amendment
- 10 Findings of National Election Studies 1996, 98, 99, 04 and India Component of the World Values Survey 2000 and 2005

- 11 When Jawaharlal Nehru was the Prime Minister (1947-64) the INC was in power at both the federal level and in most of the states. Party conventions were often used to discuss government policy matters. Nehru had the practice of writing fortnightly letters to Chief Ministers (a formal communication between the head of the federal government and the heads of the state government) in which he often discussed internal matters relating to the Congress party. For details see Shastri 1991:24.
- 12 The BJP was forced to place on hold its demand for a Uniform Civil Code, Abolition of Article 370 and Construction of a Temple at Ayodhya in deference to the wishes of its alliance partners
- 13 Within the Congress there is a clamour for Rahul Gandhi taking over the leadership of the party/government at the federal level. The Prime Minister when forming the government in 2009, made an open request to Rahul Gandhi to join the government. Rahul Gandhi politely declined the invitation and is attempting to build his political base by galvanizing the youth and rejuvenating the INC in the largest state in India – Uttar Pradesh.

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