

Parties and Politics: From the Congress System to Coalition Government

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Introduction

The Indian party system has proved to be very flexible in adapting to changing political circumstances. From a one-party system in the early decades after 1947, it has been transformed into multi-party coalitions in recent years. The majority election law which was adopted following British precedent has never produced a two-party system in India. The results of elections in recent years have been similar to those which would have been produced by a proportional election system. The rise of regional parties has contributed to this development.

The Indian National Congress, a secular party which had spearheaded the Indian freedom movement, retained its hold on India's political life for a long time until it was challenged by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which represented Hindu nationalism. The ideology of the BJP will be discussed in Chapter 10. In the present chapter, it will be portrayed as a pioneer of coalition politics. It prospered when it could attract powerful allies among the regional parties, but it lost elections when the power of its allies was reduced.

A crucial role in Indian politics was also played by the Communists. They had to cooperate with the British on Stalin's order during the Second World War. In independent India, they initially tried to regain their profile by revolutionary activities. When this failed, they returned to the 'parliamentary path'. The Chinese attack on India in 1962 led to a split of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1964. This did not weaken the position of the Communists; on the contrary, the CPI and the new Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI(M), did well in elections. The CPI(M) emerged as a major regional party in West Bengal and Kerala. However, the strength of the Communists has been reduced in recent years.

A radical fringe of the Communists established the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), CPI(ML), in 1970. It rejected the 'parliamentary path' and advocated guerilla warfare and the killing of 'class enemies'. A peasant rebellion in Naxalbari (West Bengal) in 1967 was the first instance of the revolutionary path taken by the new Communist movement. Its adherents were initially called Naxalites. In recent years, they have been called Maoists. Their aims remain the same. They constitute a serious threat to the internal security of India.

Trade unions and student associations have played an important role in Indian politics. This is due to the fact that they can mobilize volatile elements of the population. Indian trade unions are attached to political parties; they sometimes are their militant wings. This is also true of student associations which often stir up trouble in Indian universities. Being educated and articulate, the student leaders are able to influence the political lives of others. Most of them 'graduate' to positions in political parties in later years.

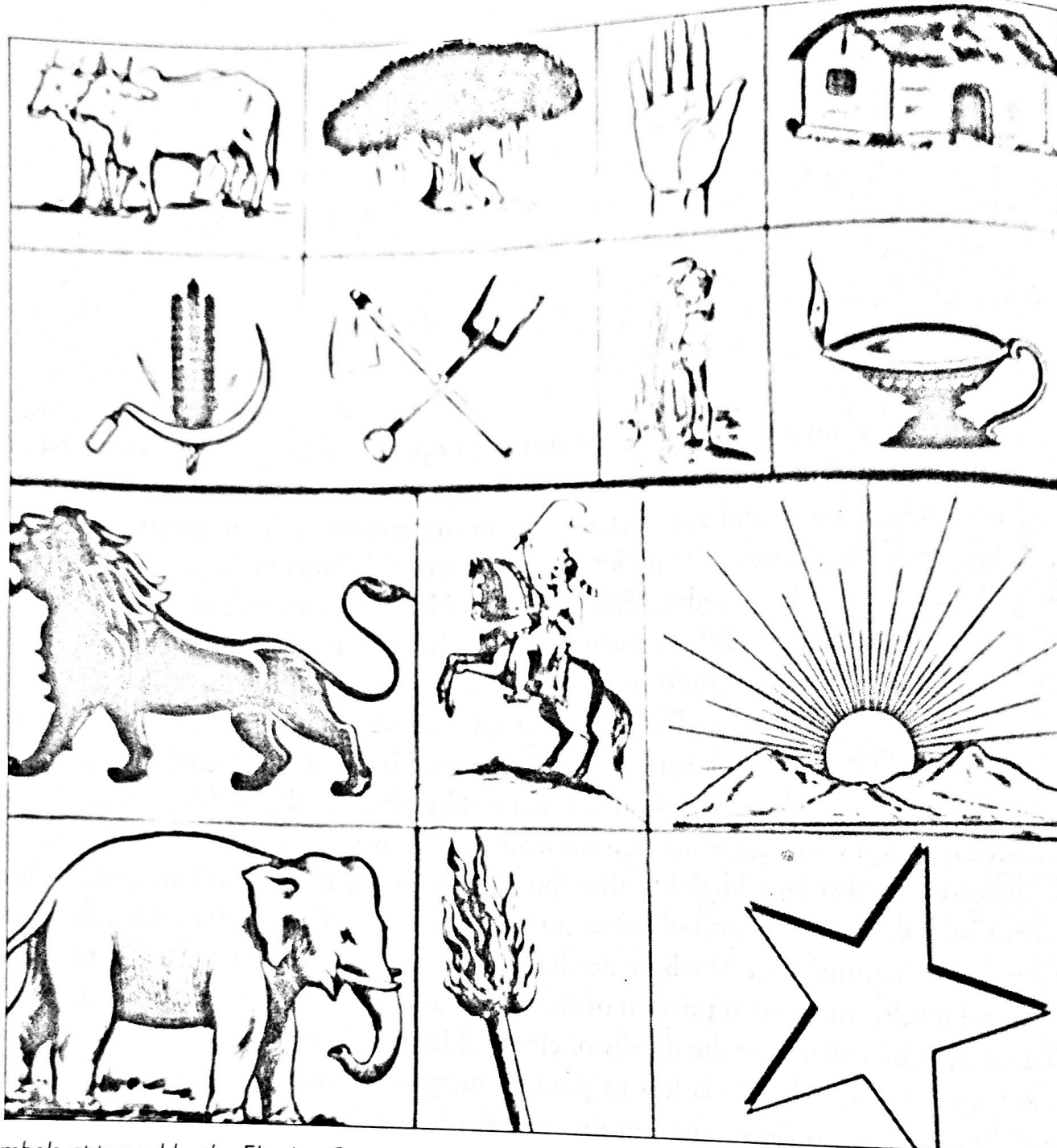
Parliamentary Democracy, Adult Suffrage and Election Laws

In the days of the freedom movement, the attainment of parliamentary democracy based on adult suffrage was the aim of all Indian nationalists. The British made hesitant steps towards introducing a stunted parliamentarianism and a restricted franchise in the course of their colonial constitutional reforms. This incited the desire of the nationalists for the establishment of a genuine parliamentary democracy. As has been mentioned earlier, Jawaharlal Nehru was an ardent parliamentarian and he was also enthusiastic about adult suffrage. In 1947, about 88 per cent of the Indian population were illiterate. The Indian elite could have argued that it would be too early to introduce adult suffrage under such conditions. But illiteracy does not necessarily imply a lack of political acumen. Oral communication has always been of great importance in India and people were usually very well informed even if they could not read and write. The right of adult suffrage was enshrined in the constitution and the first general elections held in 1952 were based on this suffrage.

The constitution also provided for the appointment of a chief election commissioner by the president of India. The position of this commissioner is equivalent to that of a judge of the Supreme Court. The commission which he heads is responsible for conducting elections at the state and the central levels, for the compilation of electoral rolls and the delimitations of constituencies.

The constitution is silent on the details of electoral laws such as the application of the majority election system, etc. All this is left to parliamentary legislation. But one crucial detail was mentioned in the constitution—the number of seats and the adjustment of their distribution according to the census data. It was stated that the number of seats in the Lok Sabha should not exceed 520 (Article 81). The distribution of these seats and the division of each state into territorial constituencies should be readjusted after each census (Article 82). This was stipulated so as to ensure that each member of parliament (MP) represented approximately the same number of people. At the time when the constitution was made, it could not be foreseen that demographic developments would cause major problems as far as this readjustment was concerned. These developments will be explained in Chapter 5. The last section of that chapter will deal with the 84th amendment of the constitution, which became necessary in this context.

Another problem of parliamentary democracy had also called for a constitutional amendment—the phenomenon of defection. It happened very often that members who had won a seat for one party then shifted their allegiance to another one. According to the doctrine that an elected representative is only bound by his conscience but not by any allegiance to a party, there was no bar to defection. However, defection was often due to material inducements and this had to be stopped. If a representative wished to change his party, he had to give up his seat and seek election

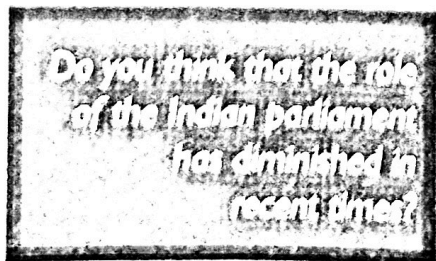


Party symbols approved by the Election Commission in 1951. Top row (left to right)—Congress (two bulls with yoke on), Socialist Party (tree), Forward Bloc (human hand), Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (hut). Second row (left to right)—Communist Party (ears of corn and a sickle), Revolutionary Socialist Party (spade and stoker), Krishikar Lok Sabha Party (a cultivator winnowing grain), Jan Sangh (lamp). Third row (left to right)—Forward Bloc (standing lion), Hindu Maha Sabha (horse and rider), Ram Rajya Parishad (rising sun). Bottom row (left to right)—Scheduled Caste Federation (elephant), Revolutionary Communist Party (flaming torch/mashal), Bolshevist Party (star).

under the new party ticket. The existing articles of the constitution protected the sitting member and his 'conscience'. Therefore, the constitution had to be amended. This was done when Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister. The 'anti-defection' amendment (52nd Amendment) was passed in 1985.

In Nehru's time, parliamentary debates were very vigorous and all national problems were discussed in detail. Parliament was truly a national forum. This was reflected in the number of annual sessions. There were about 140 of them in

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Excerpt → **52nd Amendment of the Constitution, 1985 (Anti-Defection)**

- (2) Disqualification on ground of defection ... a member of a House belonging to any political party shall be disqualified for being a member of the House
 - (a) if he has voluntarily given up his membership of such a political party; or
 - (b) if he votes or abstains from voting in such a house contrary to any direction issued by the political party to which he belongs or by any person or authority authorised by it in this behalf, without obtaining, in either case, the prior permission of such political party, person or authority and such voting or abstention has not been condoned by such political party, person or authority within 15 days from the date of such voting or abstention.
- (3) Disqualification on ground of defection not to apply in case of split.
Where a member of a House makes a claim that he and any other members of his legislature party constitute the group representing a faction which has arisen as a result of a split in his original political party and such group consists of no less than one-third of the members of such legislature party—he shall not be disqualified.
- (4) Disqualification on ground of defection not to apply in case of merger ...
The merger ... shall be deemed to have taken place if, and only if, not less than two-thirds of the legislature party concerned have agreed to such merger ...
- (7) Bar of jurisdiction of courts. Notwithstanding anything in this constitution, no court shall have jurisdiction in respect of any matter connected with the disqualification of a member of a House under this Schedule.

(Government of India, Ministry of Law 1985)

those early years whereas in recent times there are about 65 only. This shows that parliament is no longer the focus of national attention. Similarly, the cabinet and its joint responsibility has been eclipsed. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has become the new fulcrum of power. It has an expert staff in all fields concerning governance. Shastri established it when he succeeded Nehru and its impact has grown ever since. Nowadays MPs do not earn their laurels in parliamentary debates but by belonging to important committees. Each ministry has a departmental committee which keeps track of its actions. Legislation is prepared in such committees; it is then merely passed by parliament.

The electoral system adopted by independent India was not mentioned in the constitution; it was based on parliamentary legislation. The British precedent was followed without giving much thought to alternatives. The single-member, simple-plurality constituency became the general rule for elections throughout India. This is supposed to produce a two-party system according to Duverger's law. The French political scientist, Maurice Duverger, had stated that there are two reasons for this 'law'—a mechanical and a psychological one. Since only one candidate can win and the votes cast for others are lost, scattering votes among losers should soon disappear. This is where the psychological reason comes in—voters recognizing how the 'mechanics' of the system work will see to it that they support only one candidate against an incumbent whom they wish to dislodge. Duverger calls this 'polarization'. His 'law' will work best at the constituency level; it is less effective when a large number of constituencies are concerned. In a federation, the system becomes even more complex. Therefore, two-party systems in large federations tend to be historical accidents rather than the rule. India defied Duverger's law. In recent years, the results of India's

national elections have rather looked as if they were due to a proportional election system which gives rise to a multi-party system.

In the early years of India's parliamentary democracy, the federal complication of national results was to some extent obviated by the fact that elections were held simultaneously for the central parliament and all state assemblies. This was not due to a conscious plan. It happened because the elections under the new constitution were conducted for the first time in 1952. This arrangement was terminated—again, not due to a conscious plan—by Indira Gandhi's announcement of the elections to the central parliament in 1971. According to British precedent, the prime minister can dissolve parliament and call for new elections whenever he/she thinks that he/she could improve his/her position in this way. Indira Gandhi had just split her party and decided to hold parliamentary elections a year in advance. Conducting these elections as if they were a plebiscite in her favour she could score a magnificent success. As the state assembly elections were now delinked from the parliamentary elections for good, future assembly elections could reflect the interests of the individual states. From now on, federal complications prevailed and changed the working of the Indian electoral system fundamentally. As long as the elections had been held simultaneously, the candidates for parliamentary seats were carried along by the candidates for the assembly who were more numerous and much closer to the electorate. The rise and decline of the 'Congress System', which will be described in the next section, was closely linked to this shift in electoral practice.

The people of India have trusted the efficacy of their vote and the legitimacy of the political system to an increasing extent as political opinion surveys have shown. While in 1971 only 48.5 per cent of those whose opinions were recorded believed in the efficacy of their vote, 67.5 did so in 2004.

Similarly, those who asserted that there would be no better government if elections and parties did not exist had increased from 43.4 to 72.2 per cent from 1971 to 2004 (Mittra 2011: 60–61). But whereas the people obviously value the efficacy of their vote very highly, they tend to have much less confidence in their elected representatives.

They show great respect for the Election Commission and the judiciary, but very few trust the police. Government officials in general are also not very highly regarded (Ibid.: 80). This indicates that the people respect the institutions of India's political system and value their own political participation, but nevertheless have a low opinion of their elected representatives and of the agents

How is voting behaviour conditioned by social factors?

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Women voters at a polling booth in Delhi in October 1951.

of the government. As frequent changes of government in recent years have shown, the voters do use their power in order to throw out incumbents. In spite of a general belief in the efficacy of political participation in the elections, the turnout of voters has on the average remained at 60 per cent (Ibid.: 112). This is much less than in European countries but more or less equivalent to the turnout of voters in the United States of America. A special feature of India's democracy is that the rural poor tend to vote more frequently than the urban rich. This may be due to the fact that the vote is the only kind of power which the poor have whereas the rich have other means to exert their influence.

The Indian National Congress as a Centre Party and Its Challengers

Shortly before his assassination, Mahatma Gandhi had drafted a plan according to which the Congress should be dissolved or converted into an agency for social work. He felt that now since independence had been achieved, the Congress had completed its task and normal political parties should take its place in the political life of India. The leaders of the Congress were not at all inclined to honour this last wish of the Mahatma. They preserved the strong organization which he had built and used it for their political ends.