# FROM HEGEMONY TO CONVERGENCE: PARTY SYSTEM AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN THE INDIAN STATES, 1952- 2002

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The challenge of theorizing the party system in India at the state level has never been felt as acutely as it has been in the last decade or so. One reason for this is too obvious to miss. The 'nineties have witnessed a sea change in the political arena in India. It may be a long time before professional students of Indian politics arrive at a shared 'commonsense' about what these changes signify. However, it is unlikely that anyone would doubt the extent and the depth of the impact of these changes. Even to a casual observer the map of Indian politics today appears strikingly different from what it was in the late 'eighties. Professional students of politics have begun to see this change from the late 'eighties to the 'nineties as signifying 'reconfiguration' of Indian politics: it is not just that the game has started yielding different and surprising results ; in some ways the rules of the game have changed  (Yadav: 1996). It is obvious that there is a need to understand better the changing nature of the party system in order to figure out these changing rules of the game.

More than the extent and depth of these changes, the nature of these changes constitutes a more compelling reason for a relook at the party system. For these changes, big or small, do not fit into the dominant narratives of Indian politics. Hence the knee-jerk response to some of these changes. Typically, what catches the eyes is the changing fortunes of individual political parties: the sudden decline of the Congress, the BJP's dramatic rise to power, the BSP's take off and so on. The underlying change in the structure of political

competition itself is less noticed and inadequately analysed. Similarly it is easy to note an increase in electoral volatility but its causes are not well understood. There is a lot of talk of politics being increasingly shaped on the basis of social cleavages like caste and community, but the change from the past is insufficiently mapped.

The 'nineties have unleashed several independent yet simultaneous trajectories. The intensity of electoral competition has increased with the rise in electoral volatility. This has been accompanied by something of a participatory upsurge. The level of politics has shifted from the 'all-India' to the states. The 'national' electoral verdict appears no more than an aggregation of state level verdicts. All these changes have been accompanied by a change in the idiom of politics. All this adds up to quite a messy picture. Messy, not only because many of these dimensions are intertwined, but also because we do not understand many of these very well and lack a frame to see their inter-connections. No wonder, we are unclear about the durability of these changes. Are these changes here to stay? Or, are these only precursors to something else? A somewhat jumbled picture arising out of empirical complexity, future uncertainty and under-theorisation marks any attempt to map Indian politics of the nineties.

The present essay seeks to address this messy picture. We treat this apparent mess as an intellectual puzzle. We aim at defining this puzzle and situating it in a historical and comparative perspective. Historical, in that we need to trace the trajectory through which India's party system evolved since democratic political competition was instituted after independence. And, comparative, in that we compare different patterns of political

competition obtaining in the different states of India. Both these exercises, especially the latter, are badly in need of academic attention in India. There is little in the existing scholarly literature that compares to, say, to the exercise undertaken by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) in their celebrated essay in which they situate the party competition in Europe in the comparative historical sociology of the formation and freezing of social cleavages in Europe. An inquiry, which asks similar questions in the Indian context, is waiting to be carried out. The present essay, though, does not undertake that ambitious task. Our limited ambition in this essay is to frame the terms of such an inquiry and sketch the outline of how the structure of party competition at the state level has come to be what its is in today's India.

A word about the perspective that informs this reading of the party system may not be out of place here. We are interested in party system because we are interested in the possibilities of social transformation in and through democratic politics. We are interested in mechanisms through which competitive politics opens or closes possibilities of expanding meaningfully the available range of options or the probability of the more effective options being taken up. Party system is a critical mediating factor in this possible relationship between democratic politics and social transformation. The party system defines the structure of political competition that shapes and constrains the political choices that a citizen can exercise. Party system thus forms the menu of choice that determines the possibility of social transformation through democratic means. To believe in this is to share the conviction that democratic politics opens the possibility of electoral choice being turned into a radical instrument of social change, of rearranging the

composition of power elite, of renegotiating the political agenda, of redefining the relations of power in the society. At the same time this reading is tempered by the knowledge that the operation of structures of social and economic inequality works systematically against the realization of this possibility. Hence our insistence in this essay on relating party system to social and economic structures.

This essay begins with a brief review of the existing literature on state politics in India so as to trace the emergence of the discipline and its treatment of comparative study of party systems. In order to situate the present party competition in a historical perspective, we shall turn in section II to a reassessment of the famous 'Congress system' argument, first developed by Rajni Kothari. Following this, Section III takes a theoretical detour to develop a model of party system that might help us categorize the various types of party systems that developed in India after the demise of the Congress system. Our hope is that this model, that situates party systems along the two dimensions of the format of competition and the intensity of socio-political divisions, develops a greater justice to the Indian context and to our objective than other received models. This exercise yields a typology of the party system, developed in Section IV, that covers what we describe as the 'two lives' of the Congress system and thereafter. In Section V, we discuss the 'moment of differentiation'---how different states, at different points of time and through different routes, broke away from the Congress system. Various factors such as participatory upsurge, electoral volatility, etc, that contributed to electoral realignments and changes in the party system in the 1990s are outlined here. Section VI presents an overview of trends and patterns in state politics in the post-Congress polity, the period

covered extensively by most of the contributions to this volume. In Section VII we return to the starting point of this essay, namely the link between the party systems and transformative politics by evaluating the social consequences of the various political routes taken in post-Congress polity. The final section gathers together the various strands of argument presented in this essay and tries to ask the big question: how should we characterize the changes in the party system in the last decade or so? And what does it mean for the possibility of social transformation through democratic politics?

One more clarification. Although this essay stands as 'Introduction' to this collection of state specific papers, it needs to be stated that the essays on respective states are not written in response to the hypotheses developed here. The state specific essays look at the changing nature of electoral politics in different states and the hypotheses developed here are in part drawn from the material presented in those essays. The essays have a limited task at hand: they focus on the electoral politics in the decade of 1989-99. In this Introduction, we try to link the different pictures that emerge from the reading of these essays and present an overview of India's party competition in the last half century. Given the divergent nature and the scope of these exercises, the end products may not be harmonious and may indeed produce a tension.

# I

## Emergence of State Politics as a Frontier Discipline

One of the significant developments both in real politics and in the academic enterprise of making sense of politics has been the emergence of state politics as the center of attention. Once upon a time, study of Indian politics involved the 'national' level politics alone. State politics was seen as a matter of detail and would be referred to only as an unavoidable appendage of 'all-India' politics. Delhi, Nehru and the national level political competition used to constitute the fact of Indian politics and the subject matter of the study of Indian politics. A casual remark in Rajni Kothari's 'Politics in India' sums up the 'shudra' status of this discipline of state politics. While looking at the 'Indian political system as a whole', Kothari says that he did not intend 'to get lost in the esoteric details of its many constituents' and further explains this in a footnote saying that he was looking at state politics from a national perspective and those interested in state politics from state perspective may have a look at books by Weiner or Narain, etc. (Kothari; 1970: 122). Two unstated assumptions inform this statement: one, that state politics was different from national politics and second, that state politics from the perspective of state was a matter of interesting detail, but just that. For that generation of theorists of Indian politics, this was perhaps a natural reaction in view of the background of national movement and the task of 'nation-building' in which the national level political class was presumably engaged. In contrast, the politics at state level was about power, personal aggrandizement, parochial interests and their protection through lobbying, etc. Also, in the 'fifties and the 'sixties, one could understand a good deal of politics, by looking exclusively at the national level politics, national level leadership, policy-making and so on. Reference to states could be relegated to the margins of political analysis. Given the monotonous dominance of the Congress everywhere, state politics must have appeared a

poor copy of the national level politics. As political developments unfolded through the 'sixties, the discipline of state politics emerged gradually. The inadequacy of analyses of Indian politics focusing exclusively on the national level became apparent as states actually started playing a crucial role in shaping the so-called national level politics. Thus, studies on individual states started taking place. Soon this trend was strengthened by theorizations about state politics and collections where studies on state level politics were put together.

One of the early collection on state politics was Myron Weiner's 'State Politics in India' (1968) where he tries to address the question why state politics has been a neglected discipline (Weiner; 1968: 5-6). But his justification for studying state politics is much more interesting. He argues that since states constitute the main centre of decisions regarding many developmental aspects, a student of politics of development has to look at state level politics. Besides, states provide an excellent platform for comparison. Inter-state comparisons can actually tell us more about Indian politics than anything else (Weiner; 1968: 3-5). Broadly, his scheme has three grids on which to assess state politics: the federal structure of the polity, party competition with reference to participatory patterns and state party systems, and performance of state government (the last is important for his developmental approach) (18-58). At the theoretical level, Weiner's thrust is on the socio-economic bases of conflict and conditions for political stability. This was in keeping with the overall thrust of political science in those days. Weiner's volume was followed by a more comprehensive volume, at least in terms of the number of states included, that was edited by Iqbal Narain (1976).

In fact many studies of state politics were a response to the felt unintelligibility of national politics in the absence of state level analysis. The framework of national politics was supposed to be a given and whenever that 'given' was not strictly followed, scholars turned to the study of state politics to find out what was wrong with Indian politics and how it was likely to restore the 'natural' framework. As Indira Gandhi came to power and sought to redefine some aspects of the political game in India, observers were inclined to believe that it was the end of the 'given' framework. This gave rise to the language of crises, deinstitutionalization and restoration. Rajni Kothari's analysis of the Congress System was stretched by many observers to mean that it was the necessary state of equilibrium for democracy to survive in India.

Such sentiment gave rise to John Wood's theme of ' Crisis or Continuity' in another significant collection on state politics. Yet, Wood was right when he mentioned that one major issue in Indian politics since the late 1970s was the centre's intervention in state politics. He went on goes to suggest that ability of central leadership to control state politics and the responses of the states would constitute the main axis around which Indian politics would be shaped (Wood; 1984: 3). In the concluding essay in Wood's volume, Church pointed to two 'crises' facing Indian politics: the issue of participation of new social forces and the future of Congress party. He suggested a classification of states on the twin bases of lower caste entry into positions of power at the state level and ability of Congress to accommodate the claims of the lower castes (Church; 1984 236-241).

As Wood's volume was going to the press, Indira Gandhi was assassinated and a new era in Indian politics emerged. This happened not so much because of the disappearance of a strong personalized leadership style, but because of the strengthening of some features that had emerged in her own time: the continuation of the process of shift in the economic policies from a command economy to a more market oriented economy, continued shift towards competitive communalism, and the evolution of states as the main theatre of the enactment of many social conflicts. Interestingly, notwithstanding the initiatives taken by Narain and Weiner, studies of Indian politics did not respond to the emerging trend by further probing state politics. Since the late eighties, although the states were occupying the center stage of Indian politics, scholarly attention on state politics was largely missing. Many of the writings on Indian politics during the late eighties and early nineties in fact reverted to the tradition of 'national level' explanations although the empirical details were collected from state politics. Alternatively, in the absence of a comparative approach, narratives of state politics inevitably got entangled with what Church refers to as the uniqueness of the situation at the state level (Church; 1984: 230), resorting to the reports of the 'esoteric'.

This is not to say that political process at the state level politics was not studied at all during this period. Many states were individually studied by state experts and collections of state politics also appeared. More importantly, a two-volume set, not strictly on state politics, edited by Francine Frankel and M. S. A. Rao, was published (Frankel- Rao; 1989 and 1990). This work went a long way in enriching our understanding of the dynamics of state politics. It opened up possibilities of linking the analysis of electoral and party

politics to issues of resource control and domination. Departing from the practice of

looking at electoral politics almost in isolation Frankel and Rao sought to situate the

historical developments in respective states in their political economy. What Frankel and

Rao opened up for analysis the possibility of looking at states as autonomous units at

which systems of domination evolve, and therefore, at which party competition will also

have a state specific trajectory. Thus, their work helped establish state as the unit of

analysis of Indian politics. However, this major enterprise stopped well short of providing

a framework for comparing state politics or attempting a typology of states. This work

also did not go a long way in developing an analysis of India's party system. The same

point is made in the volume edited by Dreze and Sen.

As Indian politics became more and more state specific during the nineties, electoral

outcomes were also studied state-wise. Thus, Roy and Wallace (1999) and Wallace and

Roy (2003) seek to cull the meaning of two major Lok Sabha elections—the last in the

twentieth century—on the basis of state-wise analysis of these elections. These two

volumes indicate a range of issues that might be taken into consideration for constructing

a meaningful framework for comprehending contemporary political process in India.

These include regionalism, identity politics, Hindutva, etc. Wallace takes a look at the

compulsions of coalition politics affecting the political process (Wallace; 1999: 17-22).

Both the volumes, implicitly underscore the fact that state is the unit at which politics

actually unfolds. Similarly, arguing that two-party competition is the main feature of

India's party system in the nineties Chhibber and Nooruddin conclude that it is at the

state level that 'future analyses of Indian politics must concentrate' (Chhibber-

Nooruddin; 1999). The developments in the nineties and scholarly response to them have contributed to the emergence of state politics as the frontier discipline essential for a nuanced understanding of Indian politics.

However, this realization is yet to change the face of the discipline as holds persist. Many of the studies of state politics rarely adopt a comparative perspective or ask questions that would lead to the theorization of Indian politics. The usual practice to review the politics of different states and stop there. Yet there are signs of a fresh beginning was made in the nineties in the direction of a truly comparative study of state politics that could lead to a reappraisal of Indian politics. The growing literature includes three kinds of works. First there are some studies that focus on a single state, but use it to develop a larger argument about Indian politics. These include Jaffrelot on Madhya Pradesh, narendra Subramanian on Tamil Nadu, Zoya hasan on Uttar Pradesh, D.L Sheth and Ghanshyam Shah on Gujarat, Peter de Souza on Goa and some articles in the EPW collection on electoral politics. Secondly there are some studies that offer direct comparison of politics in more than one states (Atul Kohli, Aseema Sinha, the volume under preparation by Robert Jenkins). Thirdly, some analysts have attempted to offer an overview of the trends and patterns of party politics across a number of states (Pradeep Kumar, E. Shreedharan, Yogendra Yadav, 1996, 1999 and most recently Christophe Jaffrelot). Our attempt here is to draw upon this growing literature and contribute to it by looking back at the last half century of Indian politics from the vantage point of the present moment in order to link the changes in the party system and electoral politics to the developments in the field of state politics.

[To be added in this section:

1. More on Weiner's perspective on the party system

2. Something on Iqbal Narain's book

3. Wood's refection on the party system, some reference to Individual essays in Frankel and Rao that looked at the party system

4. More on recent literature: Sridharan's formulation, Dreze and Sen, Christophe, Yadav etc.

5. Some concluding reflections on why the literature did not produce much reflection on party system at the state level. Reflections on party system did not take social change seriously.]

## II

### 'Congress system' revisited

Any attempt to understand the changes in party system in contemporary India must begin by asking one elementary question: what is that original point with reference to which we seek to measure the change? An answer to this enables us to take the next logical step and ask: what has changed in respect of the party system? Implicit in the current readings of Indian politics, there often exists a map of Indian politics which existed in the era prior to the contemporary cataclysmic changes began. This map or picture informs the contrast that is often drawn. The party system is now said to be moving from one party dominance system to multi-party competition, from social cohesion to fragmentation, from a stable pattern to fluidity, from order to chaos as the principle of party competition. In order to

rethink this dominant picture of the party system as it exists today, it is necessary therefore to revisit the point of departure itself.

Since the nineteen sixties a commonsense had evolved about the nature of party political competition through the first decade and a half of India's democratic experience (Kothari; 1961, Gopal Krishna; 1967, Morris-Jones; 1964). The most powerful formulation of this commonsense was, of course, captured by the term, 'Congress system' (Kothari; 1964. Also, Kothari; 1970: 152-199). Developed in the mid-sixties, this formulation served to summarize India's competitive politics through the seventies. It was a bold attempt to theorise the unique party system that India had developed that did not fit the straightjacket of one party system or multi-party competition. Kothari himself 'revisited' the idea of the Congress system in the mid-seventies and concluded that though some modifications needed to be made to the original formulation, the basic idea could be deployed for understanding the structure of party political competition in the seventies and perhaps beyond (Kothari; 1989).

The 'Congress system' formulation contained the argument that in spite of an apparent one party dominance, inter-party and intra-party competition did take place; this competition often took place within the confines of a consensus because the Congress party was occupying the 'centre'; opposition was allowed both within the margins of this centre inside the Congress party and outside it. Apart from the structural features, Kothari's formulation involved an ideological component. The Congress system was a system of legitimacy. The issue was establishment of a democratic authority. This was

achieved in India on the basis of a historical consensus that was converted by the party system into 'present consensus' (Kothari; 1989: 25). This was possible because, the Congress system encompassed all major sections and interests of society (ibid.: 27). Kothari believed that Congress system combined the efforts to gain legitimacy and the efforts towards social transformation. The system did so by neutralizing all potential sources of disaffection. The Congress party's democratic background and the policies adopted by the congress government were instrumental in achieving this objective. This model emphasized the role of government in social change. Also, in Kothari's initial formulation, Nehru's leadership played a very important part in shaping this aspect of the Congress system.

The mid-seventies witnessed the initial challenge to the Congress system. In the eighties, the Congress party managed to return to power, though the congress system was considerably weakened. Cataclysmic events since the late eighties changed both the discourse and the framework of Indian politics. Yet it is worth noting that analyses of these changes were often anchored in the framework of the Congress system. This points to the obvious strength of the idea of the Congress system argument. Instead of trying to fit India into the received images or models of party competition from the west, Kothari's formulation sought to capture the specificity of Indian politics. It recognized the fact of one party dominance without accepting the image of authoritarian nature of politics associated with it. Refuting that there was a closure in this form of political competition, the formulation drew attention to the oppositional role of the factions within the Congress, a feature that gave a competitive character to both inter and intra-party politics.

Kothari's path breaking formulation sought to go beyond the structural aspects and looked at the more substantive aspect of the ideological dimension of party competition that actually sustained the system.

These merits and strengths of the Congress system argument notwithstanding, with the benefit of hindsight it can be seen that this argument or at least its popular versions, may have overlooked or underemphasized some aspects of the party system as it prevailed through the sixties. In revisiting the Congress system, we need to have a quick look at these aspects. First of all, the formulation drew our attention away from the simple fact that anything between a quarter to half of India was never covered by the Congress system. West Bengal (W.B.), Kerala, Tamil Nadu (T.N.), and Punjab, are examples of states where the Congress system met with opposition early on or simply did not materialise. Besides, states like Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh (M.P.), and Assam were states where Congress continued in power but was far from exercising dominance. Kothari himself points out that in the ex-princely states the Congress system was weak. But viewed in a totality, these exceptions are just too many and too significant to ignore. The only conclusion we can draw from these exceptions is that the Congress system was perhaps a description of the party system existing at the 'national' level more than the description of 'Indian' party system. This fits in well with Kothari's above cited view that he was looking at politics from the national perspective. In the sixties and later also, it was a commonly accepted view that national politics was the unit to be understood and politics in the states was to be seen as expression of the national politics.

Secondly, in Kothari's formulation, the Congress system was presented as a 'natural'

outcome of an unequal and de-centred society where a political centre was instituted.

This invited the reader to think that the system had greater enduring capacity than it

really did. Thanks to this formulation, the Congress system appeared as a regular and

long-term phenomenon whose absence or erosion required explanation. In retrospect, it

appears that Kothari may have read too much into what was a temporary political form of

the first phase of competitive political mobilization. At a time when mobilization was

rather limited, political competition could be conducted only in a circumscribed manner.

In the Indian context, the existence of Congress as a movement, as a party and as an

instrument of government combined with a towering and popular leader produced a

particular structure of competition. There was nothing in this situation that ensured the

continuation of the Congress system once the terms of popular mobilization changed.

Thirdly, the Congress system argument underlined the 'catch-all' and consensual nature

of politics. This description was factually correct. However, it does not probe the inner

logic of this consensus. Nor does the argument take notice of the play of dominant

interests. The 'catch all' character and the façade of consensus helped the Congress

system in two respects. In the first place, the Congress system sought to make

compromises with upper castes and allow their domination in the political realm. A

consensus about procedural democracy coupled with the welfare oriented

developmentalism helped in de-emphasizing the claims of the lower castes. On the other

hand, the catch all character of the congress party won elections for it, without forcing

any change in its policies or leadership pattern.  The Congress party was supported by the

masses, which belonged to various social backgrounds. This gave the party the famous tag of a catch-all party. At the same time, the party and the Congress system worked to keep the Dalits, Adivasis, peasants and workers, at a distance from positions of power. The Congress system was based on a trade off: the Congress party would symbolically incorporate the various social sections, but party's upper class-upper caste leadership should be recognized as legitimate and as representative of the masses. In other words, the Congress system was not really as open as its theorists thought it was: it was as much about exclusion as it was about inclusion. Under the cloak of consensus, a distance was always maintained between the supporters and the beneficiaries of the Congress system. Perhaps, this could be possible because as Kothari himself points out, the political class as a whole came from a common social background and was not sensitive to these sociological dimensions of democracy. This consensual nature of the political elite and their common perception about nation and development was the core of the consensus, rather than any socially agreed vision or consensus in the true sense of the term.

There is also a tendency in Kothari's argument to underplay the plebiscitary nature of politics right from the beginning of India's democratic politics in the post-independence period. With hindsight, we can say that Kothari may have overstated the system dimension of the party competition. The Congress, in spite of being a well-knit organization, depended quite happily on the charisma of Nehru for winning elections. It was a combination of state level organization and Nehru's plebiscitary leadership that ensured the dominance of the congress. The organization alone could not have brought the success, which the Congress enjoyed for a long time. In fact, Indian politics in general

and congress movement in particular, always had this plebiscitary character even in the pre-independence period. In the post-independence period, successive elections were turned into a plebiscite. Just as the organizational dimension helped Congress marginalize the opposition parties, the plebiscitary leadership style ensured that issues would be framed in a fuzzy manner, that focus would be more on personal charisma than on concrete programs or performances. As we know, this characteristic continued and played an important part in politics in the seventies. Much of the argument about the shift from Nehru to Indira Gandhi could really be saved if we are aware of this particular dimension of the Congress system that became more prominent at the later stage

This critique of Congress system does not render the formulation obsolete. In fact, the label, the Congress system needs to be retained since it reminds us of the principal character of Indian politics in a particular era. Our purpose in developing this critique is two fold. Firstly, we wish to underline the point that the Congress system was a necessarily short-term response of the early phase of democratic mobilization following the opening up of the floodgates of universal franchise. This puts in perspective the oft-expressed nostalgia for the return of the Congress system: this nostalgia hides a desire to go back to a stage of democracy when the masses were not politicized, when politics was still the game of the few. Secondly, the critique serves to remind us that the 'consensus' of the Congress system was a hegemonic construct: it did allow for incubation of democratic politics and for a safe experiment with social change, yet it could not have been the political form for a full-fledged engagement of competitive politics with social

transformation. Very early in its long life, the Congress system had become a constrain on the possibility of transformative politics.

Thus, for the Congress system to be an intelligible frame of analysis, it is necessary to trace two phases of the Congress system. Unless we do this, we are likely to adopt a static and singular image of politics in the period 1947-1977. Kothari himself is not guilty of doing this, but the popular rendering of his argument has contributed to such an understanding. To revisit the Congress system today, then, means being aware of the hegemonic dimension of congress dominance and to try and construct a typology of party system in India in a manner that will include the Congress system but extend beyond it.

## III

**A Model for Party System Change**

It is very common to invoke 'party system' in any discussion of Indian politics. But more often than not discussion of party system tends to be a loose and generalized way of discussing shared attributes of parties in a given political system. Or else, it is a simple numeric description of the number of relevant parties in a given polity: one party systems, two-party or bipolar systems and multi-party systems. Both these prevelant ways of discussing party system lose sight of the basics point behind the idea of a party system: that it is a 'system' that conditions and constrains all the parties that operate within it, that it is 'more than the sum of the parts' (Mair; 1997: 51). Therefore we need to distinguish between changing fortunes of parties and a changes in party system. For

instance, what we are looking for in this essay is not so much an explanation of why Congress came to lose power, but how and why it found itself facing a radically different pattern of political competition, and its implication for the existing parties and for popular mobilizations. Thus, the basic idea is to grasp that the configuration in which parties find themselves locked happens to be an independent factor that constrains what individual parties and voters can do. In this sense, this configuration provides a framework within which party competition and popular mobilization take place. The nature and structure of the competition determine how open or closed a party system is in processing societal claims, in allowing new entrants, in admitting unattended issues, etc.

At an epistemic plane, the conventional thinking about party systems tends to be passive in that it is assumed that there is a correct classification of the party system that cuts across time and space. In that understanding the task of a political analyst is to identify the 'right' classification and place the polity under examination in the appropriate slot in a given typology. Epistemic commonsense and political wisdom requires us to move away from such a passive stance vis-à-vis the received classifications. For classifications and typologies are not 'out there'; these are analytical constructs meant to put cognitive order on the material we seek to examine. Typologies are thus not 'right' or 'wrong'; they are more or less helpful depending on how well they allow us to order the experience that we seek to categorise and in answering the questions that led us to this typology. On this understanding, the exercise of classification is dependent on our vantage point, our location, our objectives. Therefore this attempt to understand the role of party system in democratic politics of social transformation cannot take up and simply deploy the

received typologies of party systems. We must interrogate the received classifications from our vantage point: the experience of competitive politics in India in the second half of the twentieth century and the search for democratic politics for social transformation.

Once we foreground these concerns, it is clear that there has been something of a regress in thinking about the specificity of party system in India after the decline of the Congress. Notwithstanding the limitations in the theorization of the Congress system, no one can deny that a lot of thought went into the understanding of the party system that operated in the first phase of democratic politics in India. The uniqueness of the political situation forced Indian political scientists to look beyond mechanical replication of the party system models received from the West. The decline of the Congress has removed that constrain and has produced a surface resemblance between the party system in India and its counterparts all over the world. This has led to a tendency to slip into the traditional classifications of party system produced by old-style comparative politics. Unfortunately, most of these classifications tend to be one-dimensional, based as they are on the number of parties (Duverger; 1954, Blondel; 1968, Rokkan; 1968).

To be fair, it should be recognized that implicit in the numerical dimension of traditional classifications of party systems is another dimension. Two-party system is linked with politics of moderation and governmental stability; multi-party system is linked with politics of antagonism, extremism and governmental instability. But these remain at the level of universal assumptions that are built into this classification and do not lend themselves to empirical examination. Besides, the very labels invite one to think

principally about numbers and nothing else. In that sense, in the last instance, this classifications remains one-dimensional. It may still be of use to political analysts who share the normative assumptions built into this paradigm that place premium on governmental stability and moderate choices. But it may not help students of Indian party system who see democratic politics as a vehicle of social transformation.

Such analysts must turn to other ways of classifying party systems. The most obvious starting point would be attempts to introduce more than one dimensions in the classification of party systems. Doing away with the numeric dimension, Dahl (1966) introduced a four-fold classification based on the nature of competitiveness obtaining in the party system. Sartori (1976) sought to understand party systems in a two-dimensional space. Apart from the numerical dimension (one party, two-party and multi-party) he looked at the ideological distance among the parties (moderate and polarized) and suggested a four-fold classification based on that. There is an obvious attraction to this way of thinking about party systems along a two dimensional space. Sartori's categorization allows us to consider not only the format of political competition but also its substance. That relates to our objective in this essay.

At the same time  we cannot lift Sartori's classification and apply it in the Indian context. For one thing, while he talks of one dominant party system, but it does not fit well with his classification since the pattern of one party dominance could exist either in a two-party or multi-party format and in this system ideological distance could also be 'small' or 'large' (Mair; 1997: 203). Seocndly, Sartori's classification of the numerical

dimension and 'format' of competition was meant to accommodate the proportional representation systems. The operation of first-past-the-post system and the attendant high threshold of electoral viability has tended to eliminate smaller political actors and formations. Its effect is that in India we have a more limited range of competitive format to focus on. The third and the principal difficulty about using Sartori's classification in the Indian context is his focus on ideological distance along the left-right continuum as the other dimension of party system. The problem is not, contra what many political analysts in India assert, that ideology plays no role in Indian politics. It does, except that ideological differences are not to be found in conventional language of 'high' ideology; understanding ideological differences require that we reconstruct these from day-to-day 'operative' ideological positions. A focus on formal ideologies can be utterly deceptive in indicating the substance of politics. A much deeper difficulty arises because these ideological differences cannot be arranged very meaningfully along a single dimension like the left-right axis. Post independence India, particularly post-Congress polity, is characterized by simultaneous operation of multiple and competing ideological axes. Besides, the whole idea of bringing in a second dimension in party system classification is to focus on the substance of politics from the vantage point of the possibility of meaningful choices. Even if we overlook the above mentioned difficulties, it seems much better to focus directly on the nature of political choice rather than allow any factor like ideology to serve as its proxy. Ideological differences may and sometimes do indicate the nature of political choice, but they need not always do so. Thus, in order to map the changing party system in India's various states and different political phases we need to tailor the two dimensions according to the specificity of the Indian experience.

We propose that classification suitable for India can be developed on the basis of two axes---format of party competition and the nature of political choices. Let us first look at these two dimensions separately before bringing them together to generate a typology of the nature of party systems.

The first dimension retains the conventional focus in the party system literature on the number of relevant political actors or the format of party competition. The underlying insight here is that political choices are deeply influenced and conditioned by the rules of the game set by a specific type of competition. The established format of political competition – straight, triangular or multi-polar or a version of these – determines not only what kind of political choices will be made but also what kind of choices will be offered. This dimension lends itself to easy description through received categories. All we need to do is to adapt these categories slightly to the pattern witnessed in India in the last fifty years. This dimension also lends itself to robust quantification. The Taagepara-Schugart index for calculating the Effective Number of political parties (denoted by N in this essay; the suffix V or S indicates whether the calculation is for the proportion of votes or that of seats) is very precise in giving numeric expression to commonsensical way of summarizing party fractionalisation in the legislature and among the voters.  The differences on this dimension can be placed on a spectrum that ranges from the supreme dominance of one party all over the state to multi-cornered contests in each seat resulting in the complete fragmentation of political competition into a large number of small

parties and independents. Keeping the Indian experience in mind, it is useful to divide this spectrum into four categories.

*1.One party dominance:*

In this format the dice is already loaded very heavily in favour of the biggest political party. It is not uncommon to find NS to be below 2.0, indicating more than three-fourths majority for the ruling party. The Congress victory in the first two general elections to Vidhan Sabhas in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra serve as apt illustrations of such a dominance. However, in its Indian version, one party dominance rarely translated into a similar dominance in terms of votes. Even in its hay-days, the Congress rarely crossed the majority mark in terms of popular votes. Most of the overwhelming victories of the Congress were achieved not because the electorate voted overwhelmingly for the Congress, but because the opponents of the Congress were badly splintered. In such a situation, it is not unusual to see NV to be as high as four or even five under a single party dominance. The first general elections to Vidhan Sabha in Uttar Pradesh returned a complete dominance of the Congress in the assembly (NS= 1.2) without any consolidation of votes in its favour (NV= 4.3).


*2. Two-party/bipolar competition:*

This type of competition is most familiar to students of party competion. There are two principal rivals who contest against each other in almost all the seats and divide all but few seats among themselves. In case one of them sweeps the election in a 'wave', the NS can drop to less than two (e.g. Delhi 1993 and 1998; Gujarat 1995, HP 1993 and Rajasthan 1998), but generally it stays between two and three. Given the consolidation of

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votes between the two parties, both the parties polls anything between 80 to 90 per cent of the valid votes. The NV averages around three, for the independents and rebels of the two parties tend to act as 'spoilers'.

In the Indian context one has to include under the same category the bipolar competition resulting from long standing coalitions. The classic example under this category is that of the UDF and the LDF in Kerala since 1980. A formal count would categorise Kerala as a case of extreme fragmentation with NV being six or more. But the two coalition now offer a neat bipolar choice to the electors in each constituency of the state and share around 90 per cent of the votes between them. If each coalition is treated as a party for purposes of calculating NV, the number of parties comes down to around three, as in classic two party competition. The DMK-AIADMK competition in Tamil Nadu and the Left Front's competition with the Congress till the 1996 election also belong to the same category. It should be noted that a two-coalition competition is less restrictive in its options than a two-party competition. But often the short term constrains of both these types are not very different.


*3. 'Two-plus' competition:*

This type is less noticed though not entirely unknown in the literature on party systems. It involves a multi-party competition with two principal actors and one secondary actor. Punjab has been a classic instance of this competition: Akali Dal and the Congress are the principal contenders for power and the BJP has played the secondary role. This is not quite a triangular contest, for the third party cannot offer competition in all parts of the state or among all sections of society and may often enter into an alliance with one of the

major parties. During the 1980s, the Congress performed similar role in Tamil Nadu. The enduring presence of a party of the indigenous people has had similar effect on political competition in Tripura. The 1990s have witnessed a proliferation in this form of competition with the entry of the BJP into new states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. It is difficult to tell this competition type from summary aggregate figure like the Effective Number of Parties, for the summary indicators for two plus competition often mimic those of the two party competition. By and large this category has sheltered party competition in times of transition, for our electoral system has built in disincentives for the small parties. Often the third party tends to disappear. This category tends to persist only if there is an enduring regional or sectoral interest that is continuously ignored by the two leading formations.

## 4. Multi-party competition

This omnibus category contains within itself various kinds of cases, all involving states where three or more political parties have entrenched themselves in electoral competition. This could involve three or four cornered contests in each of the constituencies (e.g. Uttar Pradesh since 1991) or different parties involved in bipolar or triangular competition in different parts of the state (e.g. Bihar in 1990s before the creation of Jharkhand or Assam since 1985) or a mix of the two (Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s). The presence of multi-party competition is indicated by NS consistently above three, or sometimes above four. In this category, NV is typically five or above. The last two assembly elections in Bihar held in 1995 and 2000 recorded NS as 3.3 and 4.7 and NV as 7.5 and 7.7 respectively. These are levels of fragmentation one usually associates only with a proportional

representation, not with our first-past-the-post system. But the simultaneous activation of regional and social cleavages can sometimes make majoritarian elections into mimicking proportional contestations. This category also contains another group of cases where political and electoral competition has never been crystallized along party political lines. A large number of political parties come up and disappear at regular intervals, parties change their labels regularly, and a large number of these manage legislative presence along with unusual proportion of independents. This syndrome typically affects the smaller states like Goa, Haryana or the states of the North East. There have been several instances (involving Mizoram, Manipur and Pondichery) in which the effective number of political parties in terms of votes (NV) went into double digits. Here party competition lacks a structure; in fact it is not party competition at all.

Having described the various categories of the first dimension of party system classification – the format of party competition – in some details, it is time to turn to the second dimension that focuses on the substance rather than the form of choice. This dimension is critical to our basic purpose of judging party systems by how they affect social transformations. Ordinary citizens cannot choose to bring about social change through electoral politics unless they this option available to them. While they can, in principle and in the very last instance, shape the menu of choices that is offered to them, the resources, the skills and the luck required to bring this about rules this our as an effective strategy for most of the ordinary citizens in their lifetime. For all practical purposes, the ordinary citizens are conditioned by the menu they have to choose from.

Sometime the voters get a wide range of substantial choices to choose from. But very often they have a rather narrow range of shallow options to choose from. Here 'substantial' and 'shallow' are not expressions of ideological judgment: citizens may and often do prefer to exercise their choices in politically incorrect ways. Here these terms are being used in a more open-ended manner. A substantial choice refers to the presence of options that could make difference to the conditions of ordinary citizens and thus bring about social change. This definition does not privilege any one domain of ordinary life over others or prescribe any definite policy route to the realization of citizens' preferences. The citizen may and often do privilege issues of collective/community dignity over those of material well-being. They might prefer the 'populist' route to that of structural transformation. While we may hold strong positions on these issues, we do not mean to make these an essential element of our classification. Nor do we link the substantial choices to any particular origins: these may come about through ideological politics of social change (e.g. that of the Communists or those of the Socialists or Ambedkarites) or may simply be a function of caste or ethnicity based mobilization of a certain social group (BSP and SP in UP, AGP in Assam).

These minimal considerations offer the following three-fold classification of the nature of political choices available to the citizens through party political competition:

*1. Substantial and/or wide range of choices:*

This condition obtains when the different parties offer radically different policy packages that have perceived consequences for the lives of ordinary citizens. This often comes

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about at the time of the rise of a new political formation that challenges the existing political spectrum on issues of policy and practice (e.g. the rise of Left Front to power in West Bengal through 1960s and 1970s, the rise of DMK in Tamil Nadu in 1960s) or in conditions of deep social upheaval and ethnic strife (UP and Bihar in 1990s, Punjab in 1980s, Assam during 1980-85) or both (Kerala in 1950s). The voters choose between very different options with long-term consequences. This tends to be a short lived phase, for periods of wide options are soon followed by narrowing range of options. Either the original challenger dilutes its agenda (e.g. AGP in Assam) or the rivals adopt the new agenda (e.g. rise of AIDMK as a rival to DMK in Tamil Nadu) or there is a mix of the two (e.g. West Bengal since the establishment of the Left Front dominance)


*2. Moderate and/or limited range of choices:*

This is the modal category of bourgeois democracy, often celebrated as the basis of moderation and stability, and derided by its radical critics as offering fictitious choices. There are choices, but within defined limits. The main parties do not offer anything that is substantially different, except a certain brand image. Usually political competition takes place around rival claims of doing the same thing better than the other. Sharp ideological differences are avoided by the principal political parties. Much of the differences revolve around one or two highly publicised issues of symbolic significance or around major personalities.

Rajni Kothari had pointed out that the Congress system, despite being dominated by one party, offered a moderate choice as a result of factional disputes and contestations within the ruling party. In contemporary times, the choice available in states dominated by the

Congress-BJP contestation (Rajasthan, MP, Delhi, HP, Gujarat) offer a classical instance of this category. Both the parties do not even pretend to offer any different economic or social policy. Even on the question of communalism that ostensibly divides them, both the parties make sure they are not at a great distance from the operational position of the other. The same is true of Congress-TDP competition in Andhra Pradesh or Congress-Janata Dal contest in Karnataka.This category also includes instances of states where politics of radical choices in on the retreat. The difference between the UDF and the LDF in Kerala today or the choice available in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh or Bihar can only be described as a moderate choice.

### 3. Shallow and/or no choice:

This category includes two very different types of cases. On the one hand there are instances where political choices were forcibly denied by use of undemocratic means (e.g. J&K and Nagaland) and imposition of regimes that lacked political legitimacy. On the other hand, there are cases where the absence of party structures means that there is virtually no systematic choice that the voters get to evaluate. Choice, if any, is at the local and personal level, and not at the party political level. Democratic theory would have us believe that such instances are exceptions that would be eliminated once competitive mobilization passes initial stages. But the Indian experience shows that such maladies can get institutionalized.

Having discussed the two dimensions separately, now we can discuss their interaction and the cumulative effect on the party system. Figure 1 summarises the interaction of the

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two dimensions and spells out the seven party system types that result from this. The interaction of three categories on each dimension (the 'two-plus' category of competitive format has been merged with 'bipolar' for reasons of convenience here) would yield nine cells in all. But the merging of two possible cells with their neighbours has reduced the number to seven. Each of these seven cells represent a certain combination of competitive form and the range of choice available within that system. Each cell mentions the dominant characteristic of the nature of political power in that category. The cell also contains some illustrations that capture the characteristics of that system.

Of the seven party system types that this classification yields,  four can be said to belong to the 'regular' types of party systems that are prevalent in post-Independence India. These are :

1.  System of uni-polar hegemony

2. System of bi-polar convergence

3. System of multi-polar convergence

4. System of competitive divergence

Besides these, there are three 'irregular' system types, each of which is the product of special and unusual circumstances. These are :

5. System of one party domination

6. Closed one party system

7. System-less competition

It cannot be overemphasized that each of these is an ideal type, illustrated by  a few states and that too in a specific period of history.  It is not necessary that each state must fit one

of these categories neatly all the time. At any given time, a state may combine elements

from different systems.  A detailed analysis of these seven categories may help us

appreciate this point better.


**Figure1:**

**Structure of political competition and nature of political power in Indian states**

| Competitive format ⇒ <br><br>Nature of choices | One-party (Single dominant party) | Two-party (Two party or two coalition) | Multi-party ('Two plus' or 'four or more') |
|---|---|---|---|
| Wide and/or Substantive options | **EXCLUSION** <br>J&K 1987 <br>Assam 1983 <br>Punjab 1992 <br>*One party domination* | **TRANSFORMATION** <br>Tamil Nadu 1960s <br>West Bengal, 1969-82 <br><br>*Competitive divergence* | Kerala, 1960s and 1970s <br>Bihar, 1989-95 <br>UP, 1989-96 |
| Moderate and/or limited options | **HEGEMONY** <br>Congress system <br>Maharashtra up to 1978 <br>UP, Bihar up to 1967 <br>AP, Karnataka up to 1983 <br>West Bengal since 1982 <br>*Unipolar hegemony* | **CONVERGENCE** <br>Kerala since 1980s <br>Gujarat since 1991 <br>HP since 1977 <br>Rajasthan, MP since 1989 <br>(1977 ?) <br>Orissa, 1990-99 <br>Karnataka 1983-96 <br>AP, 1983-99 <br>Punjab since 1997 <br><br>*Bipolar convergence* | **FRAGMENTATION** <br>UP since 1996 <br>Bihar since 1995 <br>Assam since 1985 <br>Tamil Nadu since 1996 <br>Multi-polar convergence |
| Narrow and /or no options | **CLOSURE** <br>J&K, 1953-1977 <br><br>*Closed One party system* | | **FLUIDITY** <br>Haryana 1967-72 <br>Goa in 1990s <br>Manipur <br>Arunachal Pradesh <br>Mizoram before 1985 <br>*Systemless competition* |


*1.System of uni-polar hegemony :*

The discussion of the Congress system in the previous section captured the structural

attributes of the system of uni-polar hegemony specific to India. It was a unipolar system

in that political competition revolved around and was defined with reference to the one

dominant actor. The hegemony of the Congress was sustained through its 'catch-all'

character,  through its capacity to forge a rainbow coalition of all kinds of social groups.

The system depends on not allowing deep social or ideological cleavages to politically activated. It is important to emphasise that unipolar hegemony of this kind does not depend on legal or actual elimination of rival political parties from the field of political competition . In that sense it is different from one party systems that came up in many third world countries. More importantly, it differs from these one party regimes in that the Congress system allowed external critique and internal dissent. The various factions within the Congress performed the function of opposition. The options available to the citizen were no doubt severely limited, but the range was not much narrower than the one offered by moderate two party systems in advanced industrial countries. This category is so much intertwined with the Congress system that operated in India that it is hardly surprising that most of the classical illustrations should come from it.

In describing this system as 'unipolar hegemony' we do not wish to invoke the vocabulary of international relations where unipolar hegemony of the US stands for the confluence of economic, political and military power in the hands of one unaccountable actor. We use the word hegemony here by drawing upon the tradition of social scientific usage that distinguishes 'hegemony' from simple domination. While domination is exercised through the use of might, hegemony requires consent on the part of the ruled. In that sense the system of unipolar hegemony involved democratic legitimization and acceptance of the moral authority of the largest political party. At the same time, 'hegemony' reminds us that this system was not based on pure and spontaneous consensus as it is sometimes made out to be. As Gramsci reminded us, a system of hegemony rountinely involves manufacturing of consent.

We have mentioned the Left Front regime in West Bengal as an illustration of this system to draw attention to the fact that this category does not necessarily belong to the Congress or to the past. In many ways, the hegemony of the Left Front since 1977 surpasses that of the Congress in any state of India. Notwithstanding the appearance of a coalition, it is in the last instance the hegemony of a single party, the CPI(M). Notwithstanding often tue allegations of electoral fraud and strong-arm tactics, this regime does draw upon popular consent and legitimacy. It may well be that the Left Front regime offers somewhat greater range of options than the Congress did, say in Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra. But even the supporters of the regime will not claim that it is currently involved in 'revolutionary', trasnsformative politics. On balance, it seems justified to view West Bengal under the Left Front to be an instance of unipolar hegemony.

*2. System of Bi-polar convergence*

Duverger's famous formulation stipulated that first-past-the-post electoral system in single member districts will yield a two party system. Literature on party system has emphasized that this that this type of political competition is bound to bring about political moderation and in the long run, force both the actors to converge with each other. The Indian party system defied Duverger's expectations for nearly two decades of competitive electoral politics. With the partial exception of Madhya Pradesh and Delhi, it was difficult to find instances of two party systems in India till as late as 1980s. The sudden demise of the Congress system has witnessed a proliferation of bipolar or 'two-plus' competition. Either a straight two party competition or a competition between two coalitions become the modal category in the 1990s.

India may have delayed the operation of Duverger's law, but once bi-polar competition arrived on the scene, it was, as expected a system of convergence. Bi-polar convergence in the Indian context involves homogenization and emptying of the political space. In most of the cases involving bi-polar convergence, it was the outcome of a rapid expansion of a non-Congress party (BJP in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, Janata Dal in Karnataka and TDP in Andhra Pradesh) from some regions within the state to becoming a state wide party. In most of these cases, the bi-polar competition is sustained by the catch all character of leading parties. It is not that politics lacks social cleavages or that both the parties must gain equal proportion from all sections of society. Yet the system depends on avoiding social polarization.

On policy issues and agenda of governance, the system is marked by strong convergence of both the formations. In this category, it is not very useful to draw a distinction between the moderate and the narrow options, for there is a seamless continuum from between the two. The very existence of two parties keeps up an appearance of contestation and rules out a situation that may be formally described as that of no options. Yet the contest is often reduced to a friendly match. This applies not just the Congress-BJP competition, where the two parties have to work hard to invent an issue that might differentiate them from the other in the eyes of the electorate. The LDF-UDF competition in Kerala is also marked by considerable reduction in policy differences between the two fronts. Bi-polar convergence is characterized by a routine oscillation of governmental power between the two rivals, though it is not a necessary attribute of the system.

### 3. *System of multi-polar convergence*

The received literature on party systems does associate multi-polar competition with convergence. Multi-polarity is associated with deep cleavages, social fragmentation, political antagonism and governmental instability. The experience of Indian states does not confirm this picture. It is true that the rise of multi-polar competition was associated social fragmentations and sharp antagonisms. Yet within a decade or so of its operation, the system seems to have settled for an unusual combination of social fragmentation and policy convergence. UP and Bihar saw intense caste polarization, while Assam experienced enduring ethnicisation of politics. These polarizations have instituted social cleavages in the electoral arena that may continue for a very long period. Each of these witnessed sharp policy divergences for a brief period. But very soon, all the differences were confined to the core 'ethnic'issue (implementation of SC/ST Atrocities Act in UP, Yadav dominance in Bihar, LTTE issue in Tamil Nadu and the foreigners' issue in Assam), thus clearing ground for a convergence in economic and other policy matters.

Part of this convergence was induced by the electoral system. The compulsion of manufacturing a majority in our system forced political actors to realize the limits of politics of polarization. They were forced to seek support from those very sections that they had sought to exclude from political power (e.g. BSP's and SP' overtures to upper castes, AGP attempt to court the Muslims and the migrants). But a good deal of this convergence was forced from outside by the diminishing space for politics in a globalising economy.

## 4. System of competitive divergence

We use this expression to describe a system where political competition, bipolar or multipolar, is used to offer substantial choices to the voters and becomes the basis of bringing about a change in the life situations of the ordinary citizens. The received literature on party system looks at this category with suspicion, for it represents antagonism and instability. Looked at from our vantage point, this category represents the principle of transformation and the possibility that democratic politics may become the vehicle of social change.

The different instances listed under this category represent very diverse foci and political strategies of politics of social change. While the mobilization in Tamil Nadu was along the lines of language and caste, that in Kerala was along class and caste; Bihar and UP used caste as the master cleavage, while it was class in the case of West Bengal. The format of political competition varied. While Tamil Nadu and West Bengal achieved this in the process of moving from unipolar hegemony to bipolarity, the remaining three states – Kerala, UP and Bihar – took advantage of the opportunities offered by multipolar competition that replaced the Congress system. These different cases have had varying record of the success of the change they attempted to bring about; none of these succeeded in sustaining the transformative impulse beyond a few years. With the possible exception of Bihar, all these states witnessed sharp radicalization and polarization when the party of change was still in opposition. Yet all these cases have on thing in common: the common voter in these states used the ballot to change regimes in order to upset the existing social order and its hierarchies.

### 5. One party dominantion:

The 'domination' here stands in contrast to 'hegemony' in the first type of party system. This category is used to describe such deviant but theoretically significant cases where the polity did have groups and parties that could have offered substantial choices on the questions that deeply affected the society (MUF in J&K, on-going Assam movement in Assam and Badal's faction of Akali Dal in Punjab), but the option was not made available to the people through the instrumentalities of the state. The result in each case was a deep sense of exclusion from the power that was handed over to a dominant party. The election lacked popular legitimacy and was perceived as a show of strength by the Indian state. Hence its description as 'domination'.

### 6. Closed one party system

This category would house the one party democracies established in many third world countries where the citizens had no choice. They either did not have a vote, or if they did it was of no consequence. Fortunately, the operation of democracy in India still does not offer too many instances of that. But the one party rule thrust by the Central government on the J&K between 1953 and 1977, a rule sustained by regular electoral fraud, could serve as an illustration of this possibility.

### 7. Systemless competition:

The discussion of party system assumes the existence of a system in the first place. This involves the somewhat regular existence of the same or similar political parties across a span of time, at least rudimentary organizational structure of the parties, an established

pattern of partisanship and party identification among the voters and social groups. But several states in India defy this minimal expectation and thus require a new category where electoral competition is not bound by party political conventions. It is either pure individual entrepreneurship or loose and very short term groupings that control the situation. It needs to be underlined that 'systemlessness' as defined here is not confined only to the states mentioned under this category. This malady is much more widespread and invites a separate inquiry into the systemic and external factors that bring it about and then sustain it.

## IV

### Two Lives of the 'Congress System'

After this long but necessary detour, we can now resume our journey of the evolution of party system in the Indian states and to evaluate the usefulness of the revised typology of party system offered above. We have already noted that the Congress system was a product of the specific context in which democratic politics unfolded and became institutionalized in post-independence India. In order to appreciate this point one needs to be sensitive to the historical contrast between the path of bourgeois democracy in the West and the trajectory of democratic politics in post-colonial societies. In the West, enfranchisement was a gradual process. As this process was in progress, social divisions were also taking shape. Thus, the final moment of enfranchisement was also the moment of freezing of party political divisions. This happened because mobilization along various social divisions and evolution of political organizations around these divisions had

already taken place (Lipset and Rokkan: 1967). Broadly, the national revolution and the industrial revolution created structures of cleavages that formed political divisions.

In India, the anti-colonial struggle that provided platform for powerful and mass mobilization also foreclosed the entry of many a social cleavages into competitive politics. Thus, the introduction of universal adult franchise took place in a situation where structures of cleavages had not evolved and thus a large part of society was yet to be mobilized. This provided an extraordinary autonomy to politics in twentieth century India, for it could activate, institute or mask various kinds of potential cleavages. The national movement played a crucial role in this regard. It was not that various competing cleavages dictated terms to this political movement, it was rather the national movement that played a decisive role in upholding certain cleavages and pushing to the background some others.

At the moment of independence, quite a few social divisions were available for political mobilization. Even a cursory look at these would invite a question as to why many of these were never actualized in politics. At the micro level, the village community, the *jati*, locality, were the possible platforms of mobilization. At the macro level, caste blocs, communal divisions, regional divisions within and among states, could become some of the political cleavages. Also, the division between rural and urban interests, division between the agricultural and modern economic sector could have become the bases of political contestations. Or, ideological divisions on the basis of modern vs. traditional and

Left vs. Right were also the potential platforms for political mobilization. Mobilization could also take place along issue based or class based divisions.

These potential cleavages were mediated by the imperatives of the design of modern democracy. The institutional arrangements adopted by modern democracy coupled with the background of nationalist movement made it necessary to mobilize people on a macro scale. Political competition too, came to be conducted on the all-India basis. This meant that localized, micro level divisions would not gain relevance. The aggregative compulsions of first-past-the-post electoral system did not encourage the formation of cleavage based politics. Some social categories were recognized constitutionally thus providing space for mobilization on these groups (SCs, STs, OBCs) and some others, though not recognized, already existed (Muslims, for instance). The system of reserved seats in joint or single electorates, however, limited the potential of these categories for exclusivist mobilization.

Partition of the country foreclosed the possibility of mobilization on the basis of minority status (particularly in the case of Muslim community). The minority category was accommodated by including minority rights in the constitution and postponing the issue of reform in personal laws of the minorities. Ironically, these very features were to later become the basis of mobilization both among the majority community and the Muslim minority. In the course of the freedom movement under the leadership of Gandhi, two other social divisions were accepted as more or less authentic. One was the rural\urban divide. The other was regional identity based on linguistic states. In the post-independence period, the rural-urban divide could not develop as a basis of political

mobilization, for the Congress began with a support base that cut across this divide. Language did become a platform for mobilization but once again the Congress was well placed to tackle it. By accepting the demand of reorganization of states on linguistics basis the Congress rendered the language divide politically harmless.

In the period immediately following independence, political parties attempted to cultivate social support by appropriating the different potential divisions. The map of party system of this period reflected the different spaces available for mobilization during that period. It also reflected the map of political movements of the first half of the twentieth century. The depth of support enjoyed by different parties corresponded to the way in which the congress in the pre-independence period related to the various divisions in the India society. Thus, during the first decade of independence, Congress was quite strong in parts of north India where it had accommodated the upper caste landed interests within the scope of nationalist rhetoric. It was also strong in the areas where, as in Maharashtra, it had amalgamated the middle peasantry castes with a moderate reformist appeal. In other words, the Congress cultivated different social sections in different parts of the country and put them together on the basis of the nationalist ideology. The nationalist ideology thus performed an aggregative function.

This master cleavage put other more specific cleavage based mobilizations in a position of disadvantage. The socialists were looking forward to an ideology based political division and sought to take advantage of the legacy of the 1942 quit India movement. The communists were quite strong in West Bengal and Telangana region as also Kerala. They pushed to the forefront the class divisions particularly in the context of landlordism. The

legacy of the self- respect movement and land reform movement along with trade unions in industrial centers formed the bases of the communist mobilizations. The Swatantra party made initial inroads in the ex-princely states while the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), an offshoot of the RSS, sought to construct a Hindu constituency by capitalizing upon the anti-Muslim sentiment among the upper castes. The social justice movement formed the basis of the Dravid Kazhagam (DK) in South India, while the Akali movement gave birth to the Akali party in the Punjab. This brief summary is indicative of the nature of most of the non-Congress parties that operated in the period immediately following independence. While these parties corresponded to the different potential divisions in the society, they stood in contrast to the aggregative character of the Congress party. Also, the support base of these parties depended upon the extent to which these divisions were actually explored for mobilization in the course of the nationalist movement. Mobilizations which were either explored by the Congress itself, or which evolved in spite of the Congress (as in the case of Social Justice movement), or had sympathizers within the Congress (as in case of the supporters of Hindu nationalism), stood some chance of being relevant in the post-independence period as independent political formations or as viable political issues within the Congress party.

'Congress system' was the inevitable product of this period and this historical backdrop. The central cleavage instituted by the nationalist movement (colonial rule vs. the Indian nation) was aggregative in nature and strong enough to override almost all other divisions. The congress project was the creation of a national political community that cut across all divisions. This engagement with the 'imaginary institution of India' (Kaviraj )

continued after independence. Congress became a rainbow coalition precluding other

cleavages from any significant space in the political arena. It must be noted however, that

other cleavages were not, at least on the whole, denied legitimate existence; they were

instead accommodated. We have already noted the accommodation of regional, linguistic

cleavages. By a series of micro designs and localized coalitions, the Congress managed to

hold together the macro design called the national political community. This gave the

Congress a 'catch all' character constituting cross cutting cleavages. To go back to our

typology, the congress system had the political form of a one hegemonic party that

allowed competition, dissent and opposition. Its hegemony never allowed political

divisions to be intense, either in terms of exclusiveness of party structure or in terms of

ideological persuasions.

This did not mean that no section or state gave rise to a more intense division than the

congress system cared to allow. In the first 'life' of the congress system itself, one can

come across states and social forces over which the hold of the congress system was at

best moderate. We have already mentioned that many areas escaped the congress system.

These were the under-mobilized areas such as the ex-princely areas in Rajasthan, Orissa,

and Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) as also the states in the north-east. Interestingly, the states

having a comparatively over-mobilized background (Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu,

Punjab) also remained outside of the congress system. Similarly, challenges to congress

system came both from the socially excluded (tribals, peasantry castes) and those who

were firmly 'included'(such as the urban, educated,  upper castes). As we shall see later,

the map of these challenges almost anticipates the two different directions in which the

party systems would develop once the congress system gives way. During this first life of the congress system, there were two failed efforts to challenge the congress system, one by Lohia through a social coalition of lower and peasantry castes and the other by the communists through class divisions.

**Figure 2: Map of party system in the first life of congress system**

The first serious challenge to the congress system came in 1967 when reconfiguration of party competition took place across the states. hold of the hegemonic party competition weakened and short-lived coalitions were formed in many states. It was a challenge to the congress system also in the sense that the ability of the Congress party to accommodate dissent within itself eroded considerably, forcing many groups to break away and form various state congress parties in the states. The national political community drawing its sustenance from the nationalist movement and Nehruvian developmental dream was threatened by the aspirations of the disparate social forces.

The second attempt to construct a national political community cutting across regional and social divisions marks the 'second life' of the congress system. Indira Gandhi sought to explore the mobilizational potential of the issue of poverty in such a manner that cleavage based politics produced a nationwide sensibility in support of the new national political community. Thus, a clear class appeal was employed to neutralize other competing cleavages. Another national political community was born. Indira Gandhi's victory both over her intra-party opponents and competitors outside the Congress in 1971 and her quick comeback in1979-80 had the signature of a reborn congress system.

Underlying this macro level issue based cleavage there was a careful reconstruction of the social coalition led by the Congress party. It was still a rainbow alright, but thick at its edges. There were state specific aspects to this reconstruction. In Karnataka, Devraj Urs brought to the forefront the lower OBCs, Gujarat witnessed the KHAM coalition sidelining the Patidars, while in U.P., a Brahmin-Dalit alliance was put in place. The new social coalition of the Congress had spectacular success. It cut across all other cleavages and resulted in the masking of all inter-state differences. And yet, it is possible to see in retrospect that the state-specific reconstruction undertaken by Indira Gandhi's Congress indirectly allowed consolidation of state as the main theatre for carving out social coalitions. This hidden aspect of the second 'life' of the congress system was to play a crucial role in the formation of the 'third electoral system' later in the nineties. Indira Gandhi's political success hinged on the political architecture that was based on state-specific strategies but one which could hide these specificities in order for the macro cleavage to occupy the center-stage. In the seventies and the early eighties, Indira Gandhi's macro mobilisational strategy was challenged mainly from two quarters. Charan Singh continued to press for the rural-urban cleavage as the principal division of India and uphold agrarian interests throughout the seventies and the eighties. The Jan Sangh and later the BJP sought to shape a counter-cleavage around the issue of Hindu nationalism (initially a narrow version, followed by 'integrated humanism' of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya and Gandhian Socialism). These challenges however, remained on the periphery. Indira Gandhi's defeat in 1977 came about through an entirely different route. Non-congressism was turned into an electoral platform producing the momentary

displacement of the Congress party. But this moment could not produce an alternative master cleavage for politics to stabilize around it and as a result, Congress could reassert itself electorally in 1980.

In spite of the comeback of the Congress, the national community artificially constructed during the second life of the congress system was developing cracks. Already, the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal had evolved their separate political rhythm independent of the national political waves. Haryana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh also redefined their respective state-specific patterns through the seventies and early eighties. This same period also witnessed major challenge to the national political community emanating from the states of Assam and Punjab. Thus, a large part of the nation was drifting away from the congress system. The congress system was being redefined during the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, both ideologically and in terms of the social basis of politics. Rajiv Gandhi extricated Congress politics from its vacuous rhetoric of socialism and instead brought issues of technology and globalization onto the center stage of political discussions. The eighties also witnessed the entry of new sections of Indian society into the political process. Rajiv Gandhi was successful in attracting the urban, middle class sections into the process of shaping the political agenda. These sections now started dominating and legitimating the agenda of politics and influenced the thrust of the decisions of the government. For all practical purposes, this redefinition of the congress system anticipated the momentous changes in the economic policy that were to take place later. Rajiv's efforts to resolve the Punjab, Assam and Mizo disputes forced him also to redefine the terms of political competition between the Congress and the regional political parties. In retrospect Rajiv's attempt at redefinition of the congress

contained within itself seeds of the erosion and decline of the congress system. But no one thought so at that moment.

**Suhas bhai I have finalized up to this point. Please feel free to carry out any change that you might wish to.**

**V**

**The moment of reconfiguration and differentiation**

The second life of the congress system came to an abrupt end, an abruptness that could only be seen retrospectively. The last years of Rajiv Gandhi's regime provided ample signs that the Congress system was increasingly becoming a closed system, devoid of any meaningful choices. The huge majorities enjoyed by the Congress in most of the states of north and west India in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination became a stone around its neck. By insulating the party against any pressure from within or outside, these massive majorities served to block the few remaining avenues of political learning and feedback. While on paper most of these states fell under the system of one party hegemony, the reality was somewhat different.

The Congress system was developing elements of both the other possibilities inherent in situations of one party dominance: that of exclusion and closure. The legacy of the last phase of Mrs. Gandhi's regime had turned it into a system of domination over the various minorities and ethnic nationalities. Rajiv Gandhi's regime had the effect of making the regime appear as a closed one party system, that left little for citizens to choose from. Towards the end of its second life, the Congress system desperately needed an overhaul; it needed nothing short of a third attempt to reinvent a national political

community and in the process reinvent the Congress the way Mrs. Gandhi did. Rajiv Gandhi was simply not up to this historic task.

The hold of Rajiv Gandhi over the imagination of India's middle classes began to slip after the Bofors' exposure of 1987-88. The run up to the 1989 Lok Sabha elections indicated a stiff challenge to the Congress; the result was worse than the Congress feared. But even the defeat of the Congress in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections did not suggest a collapse of the congress system. On the face of it, the election results of 1989 seemed to be the repetition of the familiar pattern of 1977: opposition unity, popular wave in north India against Congress party, a repetition of the Lok Sabha results in the round of assembly elections held in 1990, disintegration of JD-BJP alliance reminiscent of the break up of Janata party, formation of a minority government by Chandrashekhar on the lines of Charan Singh regime. All the details seemed to fit in the model of 1977-79. It was therefore, natural to expect the return of the Congress in the 1991 election to the Lok Sabha. That did not happen, not even with the support of a sympathy swing after Rajiv Gandhi assassination during the campaign. This, perhaps, was the moment of demise of the congress system. Ironically, the first government to be formed in the post-Congress polity was a Congress government. But the rules of the game had now changed. This was demonstrated by a string of Congress defeats in the series of Assembly elections between 1993 and 1995.

Transition from the congress system to the post-Congress polity was neither gradual nor smooth. It was a product of a systemic shock, a cataclysmic transformation. It was not merely the change in the ruling party or a change in the political actors engaged in

competition for power. The terms of political competition and the issues involved in this competition changed dramatically around this time. This period was marked by a fundamental reconfiguration of the party political space. While the decline of the Congress seemed like a crisis initially, it was also an opportunity to revitalize the democratic political competition and introduce greater substance in this.

This reconfiguration of the structure of political competition was marked by the arrival of the three 'Ms' on to the national political stage: Mandir, Mandal and Market. This moment of sudden transformation deserves careful recall and scrutiny, if only to understand better the momentous consequences of some of the changes that happened almost overnight. The controversy over the disputed site at Ayodhya was revived by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and later picked up by the RSS and the BJP. This resulted into the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation, which witnessed high emotional mobilization among the Hindus and attempts at constructing a homogenized Hindu constituency across caste and region. The politics of Mandir, however, also, brought into sharp focus questions about the plural character of Indian society and the resilience of the democratic political process. The Mandir controversy was associated with division of the society between majority and minority religious communities, series of communal violence and challenges to the institutional set up. With Advani and Govindacharya as the chief architects, the Mandir issue sought to shift the terms of political discourse from plural democracy to majoritarian politics. What began in the eighties as an agitation by a small section of fanatics, turned into a major framework for conducting politics during the nineties. Even before the actual demolition of the Babari Masjid in December 1992, the

politics of Mandir had already occupied a central position in national politics. The BJP was catapulted to the center-stage by the events of 1989-1991. First, the BJP propped up the V.P. Singh government so long as it suited the interests of the BJP. Then, the BJP came to power in the most crucial state, Uttar Pradesh. This was followed by the party's spectacular performance in the Lok Sabha elections of 1991 that saw the BJP emerge as the main national opposition party.

But alongside these developments, this period also witnessed the unfolding of another process, the rise of dalits and the other backward classes in Indian politics. Politics of the backward classes has a long history. In states of south India, the rise of the backward classes had taken place in the sixties. But both in north India and at the national level, the entry of the backward classes was stoutly resisted. The failure of the Congress to adapt to the ambitions of these sections in most parts of the country and especially in north India had cost it dearly in 1977-78. Yet the party chose to ignore the recommendations of the Mandal Commission and let the report of the Mandal commission become the symbol around which politics of the other backward classes was built in north India. When the recommendations were actually accepted by the V. P. Singh government, clashes between the forward castes and the backward castes took place in north India. Both the Congress and the BJP sought to ride piggyback on this upper caste backlash. The politics of OBCs was already inaugurated. Sweeping the states of U.P. and Bihar, the Mandal issue brought into focus questions about not only the reservations and backwardness of the 'lower' castes, but also the question of share in political power.

The Mandal factor instituted caste cleavage at the heart of north Indian politics. It set the tone for the discussions of social justice and symbolized the upsurge of the subalterns. The upsurge was not limited to the OBCs. The BSP, under Kanshi Ram's leadership had shifted its emphasis from Punjab and Haryana to Uttar Pradesh and started scoring upsets quietly under the din of Mandir and Mandal. The BSP was to make deft use the sudden opening in UP politics and surprise everyone by striking an alliance with SP and winning the 1993 assembly elections in the state. UP has never been the same again. Although V.P. Singh may be seen as the chief architect of Mandal strategy, 'Mandalisation' of politics of north India could not have happened without Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, Laloo Prasad and Mulayam Singh. Soon, no party could afford to take this issue lightly.

If Mandir and Market had their rise in the late eighties, the third 'M' surfaced as the new decade unfolded. Yet, it may be noted that the beginnings had been made in the eighties. Throughout the eighties, the Indian state was following, somewhat surreptitiously, the program of restructuring the economy. However, it was only in 1991-1992 that bold justifications of the 'market economy' started emanating from the official discourse of the Indian state. Narsimha Rao and Manmohan Singh were its architects. Once it emerged, it went almost unchallenged by the political establishment amid the din over Mandir and Mandal. In any case, V.P Singh was the finance minister in 1985-86 when Rajeev Gandhi took bold initiatives in this direction and the BJP said that the new initiatives were what it always wanted. Thus, there was little political resistance to the adoption of new ideological position on the economic policy. But more than a state ideology, 'Market' ascended to become the ideology of the intelligentsia, the

bureaucracy, the civil society, as if it were. A false or misplaced debate over 'socialism' quickly gave way to a more fashionable Nehru baiting. By the time the United Front government came to power at the center, all this was history. The new government quietly and willingly set about the task of continuing the economic policies initiated by its Congress predecessors and when the BJP finally came to power, it sped up the pace of changes perhaps somewhat brazenly. The Market design of politics did not aim at producing a class cleavage. However, the project of letting loose the 'middle class' consumerist ambition and developing unbridled capitalism ended up instituting class cleavage. At a more subtle level, the Market design redefined the political discourse by replacing the nationalism-colonialism contrast that sustained the national political community since the freedom movement. Such a reworking of the political discourse could have taken place only after the collapse of the USSR.

In retrospect, these three 'Ms' look like three projects: three new frameworks of politics trying to replace the old and tattered framework left by the congress system. It is worthwhile to pause and note what they were actually trying to replace. In its first life, the congress system drew strength from projecting a master cleavage: the nation vs. the colonial power. This construction helped the congress system build a 'national' or 'all-India' political community. This was to be the node around which Congress domination was carved out. In its second life, when the relevance of the earlier cleavage had considerably declined, Indira Gandhi sought to construct the 'all-India community' by exploiting the cleavage between the poor masses and the rich.

Mandir, Mandal and Market should be seen as three projects to re-create the 'national community'. The Mandir design aimed at establishing the national community with Hindu community as its central pillar while the Mandal design privileged the OBCs as the core of the national community. The third design saw the middle class as the anchor of the reinvented national community. In doing so, these designs also tried to project a meta-cleavage around which competitive politics would be conducted. The congress system collapsed both under the weight of its own weaknesses and the pressure of these new designs.

The history of Indian politics since 1989 is the history of these three competing frameworks colliding at different points with unequal force and producing consequences no one person intended or anticipated. In the period of electoral volatility and governmental instability, collision and competition among these three powerful designs created unprecedented space for the reconfiguration of party system. The complexities involved in the competition between the new forces emerging out of these new designs and the competition among these designs themselves define the moment of differentiation, the moment of shift away from the congress system in the nineties. Many states, through their separate trajectories, saw the back of the Congress party in assembly elections in the nineties and by the mid-nineties, this trend appeared onto the national political scene.

Looking back at that moment after more than a decade, it is clear that none of these three frameworks have realized fully their own designs. In fact, the main architects of these frameworks, except Advani, are all on the political margins or in the wilderness. And yet,

all the three have transformed the conditions of political competition as well as content of the politics. The Mandal framework didn't succeed in instituting an all-India backward-forward cleavage to serve as the basis of a new political formation or coalition. The rise of dalit and OBC parties did achieve localize success in instituting caste cleavage in some states, like U.P. and Bihar. Even there, the Mandal framework could not realize the unity of all backward castes, let alone a broader dalit-OBC unity. Instead, it intensified caste awareness and political ambitions among the various backward and dalit castes.

The main success of the Mandal framework, however, lies in changing the social composition of the political elites within different parties. Post-Mandal, all major parties accommodated the ambitions of the backward classes and facilitated the entry of the leaders belonging to the backward castes both at state level and central level. Ironically, this success of the Mandal framework has meant that the aspiration of its chief protagonists to emerge as the leaders of all backward castes has not been fulfilled and they (particularly Laloo and Mulayam) have been mostly confined to their respective states. Dalit upsurge has more substantive achievements to its credit than has the rise of the OBC. At least in Uttar Pradesh the entry of the BSP into high politics has changed the texture of daily life and contributed to the dignity of ordinary dalit citizen. Notwithstanding all these achievements, the fact remains that Mandal framework failed to realize its principal ambition of instituting an enduring all India cleavage and in aggregating the gains of dalit and OBC upsurge. Mandal was fragmented, localized and thus contained.

The success and visibility of the Mandir framework has been a little more pronounced than the Mandal framework. Its objective of instituting an all-India issue cleavage along Hindutva vs. non-Hindutva line that would render other divisions obsolete did not succeed, at least not in the way the RSS family wanted. The attempt to create an all-India Hindutva community soon came up against regional and caste divisions. These limitations notwithstanding, Mandir framework has been successful in three respects. Firstly, it has successfully caught the imagination of the educated middle classes. Secondly, the communal cleavage has made its presence felt across the country in areas where the BJP or Jan Sangh did not have any space earlier. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the Mandir framework has altered the terms of political discourse. It has pushed the secular democratic character of the nation-state into the arena of contestation. Though its immediate objective of constructing a temple at Ayodhya has not been fulfilled and its dream of becoming a natural party of governance in Uttar Pradesh on this basis lie in tatters, the Mandir framework has exploited its failures to shift the terms of political discourse about the nature of Indian nation. In that sense the fate of Madir has been quite the opposite of Mandal: it has met with local failure but has succeeded in creating something of an issue cleavage at the national level.

Market has been the least voluble or visible of the three projects, but it is perhaps the most successful of the three, in realizing its objectives. As mentioned earlier, its success mainly hinged on creating a subterranean convergence involving all the major political parties and thus insulating economic policies from the logic of democratic politics. Successive finance ministers shared the common policy space in the nineties, making it

possible for the Market project to be realized. The liberalization of the economy and its

integration with global capitalism replaced the national vs. colonial cleavage from the

cognitive map of the politician and the middle class alike. The market project facilitated

not only the integration of Indian capitalist class with their global counterparts, it also

provided the ground for an alliance between India's capitalist class and the burgeoning

middle classes. This alliance ensured that economy would be insulated from the volatility

of electoral verdicts. Thus, the Market project succeeded in de-linking itself and

economic policy decisions from party political competition. While politics would contest

the social character of power and the ideological content of nation, economic policy

making was 'depoliticised'. Thus Market succeeded in emptying democratic decision

making of a significant range of choices. The choices were not available to the citizen,

for the subject matter had been taken away from the arena of democratic politics. This is

how despite governmental instability, India witnessed remarkable economic policy

continuity. Hidden in these successes of the Market project, however, have been many

unintended consequences. As observed earlier, class cleavages have become sharper, the

normalization of the workforce has been under way and this has been altering the patterns

of mobilization, the social location of the middle classes has moved farther from the poor

and the disprivileged, civil societal sensitivity to poverty and suffering has declined, and

so on. These developments have changed the ground for politics in the long run. The

consensus on new economic policy cutting across the political spectrum has brought

about a subtle shift in the party system. Whatever the format of electoral competition,

and wherever their prior location on the two-dimensional map of party system space, all

the states have moved downwards on the dimension of the nature of political choice.

This collision of attempts at creating caste, communal and class cleavages may or may not have succeeded in creating any of its intended divisions, but it did certainly produce a lasting effect on the nature of party political competition that no one designed: the rise of regional or state based politics. Suddenly, in the nineties, state boundaries became the real boundaries of the political universe. State became the relevant unit at which politics was conducted and was intelligible as well. This takes us to one of the central puzzles of Indian politics at the turn of the century: how did three competing attempts to homogenize politics and to create a national political community end up creating quite the opposite, a political community differentiated at the state or regional level?

To begin with, the existing party system constrained the extent to which these homogenization projects could be realized. Given the unevenness that had developed towards the end of the congress system, the existing structure of political competition offered uneven opportunities to different projects in different parts of the country, creating an impression that state was the theatre where this drama was being unfolded. There was for instance, little space outside the congress system for caste or communal project to spread. This excludes West Bengal, A.P., Tamil Nadu and Kerala from the locations likely to affected by the Mandal or Mandir projects. In many parts of south India, the caste issue had already been routinized and the Mandal project only effected an additional closure as far as terms of political competition were concerned. It was mainly in U.P. and Bihar where Mandal project redefined the terms of political competition. In the rest of north Indian states, it was not as successful mainly because of the lack of a

political carrier. In states like Maharashtra and Gujarat, issue space was fuzzy and political carrier was lacking. For the Mandir project too, north India provided the main theatre because of the availability of both issue space and political carrier. Gradually, the Mandir project penetrated those states where the congress system was declining (for instance, Maharashtra and Gujarat). This led to a differentiated structure of opportunities and political competition. Initially, the occasion for differentiation arose out of the desire of the political actors to take advantage of uneven opportunities in different states. Later, the Mandal and Mandir projects attempted to restructure the opportunity space and the party competition itself.

Secondly, a long-term change in political geography had prepared the ground for effective utilization of this unevenness. The politico-administrative structure had produced internal political homogenization of most of the states. The struggles for formation of a separate state (as in case of A.P., Punjab, Maharashtra, etc.), occasional rhetoric of regionalism or backwardness and discrimination (for instance in Tamil Nadu, or say, Bihar), separate political trajectories different from the congress system (West Bengal, Kerala,), were some of the factors responsible for creating opportunities of internal homogenization within the state. Besides, the existence of the state as units of federal governance had created the salience of state as a political unit. People of different states got used to the state as the scale of political choices. This had two implications. While people understood national politics through the prism of the state, there was an unwillingness to recognize any other scale or unit of politics between the state and the central government. This contributed to the homogenization of the state. On the other

hand, the emphasis on the state also means that any alternatives smaller than the state disappeared from political consciousness of the people. Regions within states or districts, etc., became only administrative categories and lost much of their political salience.

The cumulative effect of all these factors was the process of intra-state homogenization that has been slowly and gradually taking place almost since the 1950s. It has had an inverse relationship with the level of inter-state variation. Three patterns may be observed in this respect. Initially, just after the constitution of the Indian union, when inter-state variation was moderate, intra-state variation was very high. This was followed by a period, during the second life of the Congress, of low inter-state variation coupled with moderate intra-state variation. Finally, we are now witnessing a phase when inter-state variation has increased, but intra-state variation has become insignificant. This sums up the story of the rise of states as the authentic node around which political competition becomes intelligible.

Thirdly, the political and economic experience of the last five decades promoted the growth of states as the principal political unit. During India's journey on the road of development, state governments became the loci of all day-to-day concerns and aspirations of the citizen. Simultaneously, the formation of states on linguistic basis provided a common cultural platform. Now what Anderson calls the 'print cultures' of the regions coincided with the boundaries of the states. This strengthened the separateness and identity of the state. These factors ensured that the three 'M's discussed

above were institutionalized in the party political space in a state specific manner. This explains the paradox of the drive for homogenization producing differentiation.

Let us briefly sum up the nature and consequences of this differentiation for party political competition.. It must be emphasized that what we are witnessing is not 'regionalism'. Paradoxical though it may seem, the ascendance of region or state to the center-stage of Indian politics is not an outcome of any conscious ideological mobilization or movement based on regional outlook or sentiment. Instead, it is a structural consequence that was largely unintended. Moreover, this ascendance of the states is not accompanied by the regionalist tendency. It is a shift of the 'locale' of politics and as a consequence, the filtering of the three frameworks of politics through state-specific configurations. Further, it will be a mistake to describe this development as rise of centrifugal tendency or mere 'de-centering' of the nation, for the process has given rise to intra-state homogenization and in the process turned the state into a strong locus of power.

This process of differentiation has already had three long-term consequences for shaping the structure of political competition and filtering the range of effective choices available to ordinary citizens. First, we witness the emergence of the state as the effective level of exercising political choice. Contemporary politics in India has rendered lower level as unviable and anything higher than the state is perceived as unconnected or remote. This means that national level electoral verdicts are mere aggregation of state level verdicts. It has also meant that national level verdict becomes intelligible only when understood in

its state-specific context. Second, there is now greater space and incentive for state level political formations to emerge. In the period of decline of the congress system, a number of 'state level' parties have come to the forefront. Parties like the SP, RJD, INLD, TMC and the BJD, are some of the examples of this. Finally, the process of formation of new states has also become less contested than before. The relative ease with which Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand were added to the Indian union in November 2001 is a case in point. Wherever the project of intra-state homogenization encountered variations that resisted stream-rolling, new states could be formed without the anxieties previously associated with such decisions.


## VI

**From Hegemony to Convergence in Post-Congress Polity**

The period of transition from the 'second life' of the Congress system to the 'post-Congress polity' was marked by a very unusual historic moment around the beginning of 1990s, a moment of the reconfiguration of the party system and differentiation of the state level political trends and patterns from the national level. As we have noted above, this moment was characterized by a confluence of long-term forces, cataclysmic events and historic personalities. The moment of reconfiguration and differentiation thus created different opportunity spaces in different states and for different social groups. The political story of the 1990s is the story of how different political actors – parties, leaders and social groups – came to utilize this differential and differentiated opportunity space depending on their skills, resources, vision, mobilizational capacity and, of course, sheer luck. The focus of social science reasoning on structures often leads us to underestimate

the role of agency in such critical and fluid moments of 'structuration'. Could, for instance, Congress have had a 'third life' if Rajiv Gandhi was not assassinated, or if he was succeeded by a mass leader capable of transforming the party? More realistically,was Gujarat likely to develop a two-party system if Chimanbhai Patel had not led the suicide of the Janata Dal? Would Bihar have witnessed the regime transition without the presence of Laloo Prasad? What, for instance, if Mulayam Singh had pre-empted Kanshi Ram in mobilizing dalit voters and thus forging a dalit-OBC unity from below?

In particular, the story of the 1990s is the story of a radical opportunity opening up due to the end of Congress hegemony. There was a historic opportunity of freeing democratic politics of the closures and exclusions that the Congress system had come to apply and to open up political space for articulation and aggregation of interests and aspirations of the various social groups and regions that the Congress system found itself increasingly incapable of addressing. At a more general plane, the end of the Congress system opened the possibility of competitive politics providing greater room for substantive choices for ordinary citizens. The story of the last fifteen years is the story of how this historic opportunity was missed and negated in and through the arena of competitive politics. At the level of the party system, it is a story of the transition from a system of one party hegemony to a system of bipolar and multi-polar convergence. While the format of political competition underwent a radical change, there was little corresponding change in the nature and range of choices available to the citizen. If anything, at the state level there has been a rolling back of the temporary expansion of the range of effective choices available to the citizens. In that sense the story of the 1990s is the story of how the logic

of structures of socio-economic inequalities worked as a constant 'drag' and finally overpowered and contained the democratic upsurge in the post-congress polity.

The opportunity opened up by the end of the Congress system was not available in equal measure and in a similar measure in all the states. Many states had already broken away decisively from the Congress system before the critical moment of reconfiguration of differentiation. Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh had their 'criticial' elections in 1983, reinforced by mid-term polls to the assembly in both the states, where the long established patterns of Congress partisanship were decisively broken to give way to what appeared like a two-party system. The Congress hegemony in Assam came to an end with the 1985 elections. The Congress hegemony in Haryana was always suspect, for ever since the formation of the new state the party could never develop enduring support among the dominant Jat community; whatever remained of its hegemony was washed away in the 1987 electoral wave by Devi Lal. And then there were states like West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu that had broken free of the Congress hegemony way back in the 1960s. The reconfiguration of the party system, especially at the national level, was to have some effect on these states too. In particular the logic of differentiation applied to these states with equal measure. But these states were not the principal sites of the effect of the end of the Congress hegemony.

The principal sites open to radical reconfiguration were of course the states, mainly of north and west India, that were still under the system of Congress hegemony till 1989 or so: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa and in lesser measure Himachal Pradesh and Delhi. The sudden demise of the Congress

system created a room in these states for the entry of new political forces or for rearranging the format of party competition. It created an opportunity for new issues and demands to be articulated effectively within the party political arena. It released, even if momentarily, the various subaltern communities and groups that were traditionally affiliated to the Congress and opened for them the opportunity of political bargaining. In particular it left Congress vulnerable to aggressive sectional mobilization of these groups. This had implications for the political strategy of the Congress and its rivals. As the opponents of the Congress pursued successfully the path of sectional mobilization, the Congress found that its catch-all strategy was increasingly not viable. In response to the sectional mobilization by its rivals, the Congress too became more of a sectional party than it was ever before (Yadav 2003).

The states that broke away from Congress hegemony around or after 1990 followed three broad trajectories. In the first group are states of north and west India – Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and possibly the new states of Uttaranchal and Chhattisgarh -- that shifted from Congress hegemony to a neat bipolar convergence involving the Congress and the BJP. The second group of states include Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – and now Jharkhand – that utilized this opportunity in a more radical way by moving from Congress hegemony to a system of competitive divergence of a multipolar variety. However these states did not stay here for a very long and have moved towards a system of multipolar convergence. The third group of states – Maharashtra and Orissa – took a more ambiguous route involving a transition from

Congress hegemony to multipolar convergence of sorts. Let us look at each of these routes closely.

In terms of democratic possibilities of social transformation, the transition from Congress hegemony to Congress-BJP oscillation is the least promising. The transition involved merely a reshuffling of the political furniture with little or no change in the range and the nature of choices available to the citizens. The principal change in the format of political competition here was the elimination of the third force from the menu of political options. It needs reminding that all these states had a significant presence of some version of Janata Dal till as late as 1990: the Janata Dal of Rajasthan was well entrenched in the eastern and northern regions, especially among the Jats; the Janata Dal of Gujarat was in fact electorally stronger than the BJP; the Janata Dal and the Communists was weaker in Madhya Pradesh and Himachal, but not extinct; the rural outskirts of Outer Delhi had a strong presence of Janata Dal. In all these states, the third force suddenly disappeared in the Lok Sabha elections in 1991 and the assembly elections held subsequently. The BJP used its Ram wave votes to become a state-wide rival to the Congress in all these states. Ever since the emergence of a neat two-party system in this group of states, there has been a distinct 'dumbing down' of the political discourse. While the Congress has a distinctly lower caste, lower class profile in terms of its support, this is not reflected in its policy postures or actions. Power oscillates between the two parties – regularly in Himachal, Rajasthan and Delhi and less regularly in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh – but without much change in the agenda of politics. The high entry barrier set by bipolar system enables both the parties to push any serious challenger – the BSP in Madhya Pradesh, the HVC in Himachal and the various Uttarakhandi groups in Uttaranchal –

below the threshold of electoral viability. In many ways the choices and bargaining opportunities available to the citizens has reduced since the emergence of the two party system. Arguably, Gujarat may not have gone the way it did in 2002, but for the elimination of the third force and the neat bipolar choice.

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the demise of the Congress system was accompanied by the sharp decline of the Congress Party.  In Bihar the Congress never fully recovered from the Socialist challenge in the 1960s and continued to lurch in the state while it had a vibrant second life all over the country. In Uttar Pradesh, it was less a case of inherited weaknesses than of inability to respond to the multi-pronged onslaught from the BJP, the BSP and the JD (later SP) between 1989 and 1991. The very sharp decline of the Congress Party in both these states opened a huge opportunity for its rivals, unlike the states in the first group where the space released was very limited.  The BJP's famous victory in the 1991 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh barely concealed a fundamental change in the rules of the game: electoral contests all over the state had become triangular, if not quadrangular. The BJP took away a slice of the upper-caste and lower OBC vote of the Congress, but created a new constituency for itself.  The SP consolidated the traditional peasant base of Socialist parties and combined it with the Muslim vote snatched from the Congress. The BSP's Dalit vote came principally at the cost of the Congress. Attacked from all the sides, the Congress was left with no section of its own and was reduced to a rump. The fragmentation of party political space and the competitive politics of caste-community polarization opened spaces for regions, issues and groups that had no voice during Congress hegemony. The issues of Dalit  dignity and

atrocities against Dalits on to the political agenda; that the Muslim vote cannot be taken for granted; demand of regions like Uttarkhand, Harit Pradesh and Poorvanchal have been placed on the political agenda and the competition for lower OBC vote has improved their bargaining capacity.

Uttar Pradesh did not stay in the system of competitive divergence for very long. Once the three big players had reached a point of saturation of their respective caste-community support, they started looking for strategies to go beyond their "natural" constituency. This imperative of manufacturing a stable majority in this electoral system combined with a lack of economic agenda of the SP and BSP and their inability to come together has meant that the major players are involved in an unfinished search for points of convergence. Their antagonism has turned more personal than political, more episodic, than policy driven. It seems that the possibility of the system of competitive divergence producing transformative social and economic policies has receded in Uttar Pradesh.

Bihar has reached a similar state through a different route. Here the space vacated by the Congress and the absence of a strong Ram lehar or a Dalit formation around 1990 was ably utilized by Laloo Prasad to create an enduring social bloc that has ensured a continuous rule of this party. Here again, the fracturing of party political space has opened up many democratic possibilities: the strangle-hold of the upper-caste over positions of power has been eased, demand for Jharkhand state was conceded, the voice of backward communities within Muslims is being recognized. But the continuous electoral dominance of the RJD despite a dismal track-record on development has meant the disappearance of developmental issues from the political agenda. The citizens of Bihar do have a wider range to choose from, but may not have any substantial choice on

the menu. The party system in the newly formed state of Jharkhand is yet to crystallize. As of now, the competitive format lies somewhere between the 'two plus' and the multi-polar types of contestation. It is more likely that it will move straight into multi-polar convergence, with the crucial issue of the control of adivasis on natural resources being kept outside the political domain. But there is an outside chance of a bipolar convergence between Congress and the BJP at the cost of the JMM.

The third route is more varied but the destination is not very different from that of the first two. It involves moving from Congress hegemony to multipolar convergence with a brief halt at bipolar competition. The longest lasting and perhaps the most intricately worked out system of Congress hegemony came to an end in Maharashtra in 1995. Since then the competitive structure is basically bipolar, though the presence of the BJP as the Shiv Sena's smaller partener and the split in the Congress gives political competition a quadrangular appearance. Since the Congress hegemony in this state had not become a system of exclusion and closure as it did in many others, it is not clear if the bipolar or quadrangular competition has added much to the menu of choice. [Suhas bhai: take a close look] In Orissa, the institution of first a bipolar (Congress – JD) and then a triangular (Congress-BJD-BJP) competition has added little to the political agenda except the question of regional discrimination. In this state untouched by Mandal, dalit upsurge or class mobilization, the choices available to the electors are perhaps one of the narrowest in the country.

Similar pattern of change in the competitive format characterizes Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Assam, though this has been accompanied by a marginal expansion of the

range of choices available. In all these states, the entry of the BJP has changed the competitive format. In Karnataka it happened first in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, but the BJP has stagnated since then. Despite its many splits and unities, the JD has maintained a significant presence especially among rural agrarian classes. The TDP, especially under the leadership of Chandrababu Naidu, built on the opportunity it gained in 1983 in a way in which the Janata Dal of Karnataka failed to. The TDP replicated the catch-all character of the Congress in social term and was in fact one of the few non-Congress parties to develop an enduring support among the poor and the very poor. Naidu also used deftly the opportunity provided by coalitional politics to prevent third party inroads into an essentially two-party system. With a strong challenge to the established parties from the Telangana Rajya Samiti, the state may be headed for a 'two plus' or even multipolar competition. Despite a one party rule currently, Assam is more mutipolar than any other major state of India. The AGP's inability to hold on to its social constituency or build enduring social coalitions has opened the space for the BJP's entry into the state. More than the BJP's entry, it is the fractionalisation of the party political space along ethnic lines that may be the defining characteristic of Assam's party system for some time to come. This fragmentation has created room for articulation of the demands of smaller groups and ethnicities, but it is not clear if this expansion has any transformative implications.

The states that had broken away from the Congress system in the 1960s have not been affected by the demise of the system, though some changes have come about in these due to other factors. Kerala is the one state that has seen virtually no change in its party system in the last twenty years. In the period since 1990, the bipolar competition between

the UDF and the LDF has continued as in the past with some minor adjustment among the UDF partners. This tight bipolar competition has left no space for the BJP or any outsider to gain a toehold. The end of the Congress system has not meant a decline of the Congress party in Kerala. The overall tendency is for the two alliances to come closer to each other on the issue space in Kerala politics, though it is not quite a case of full convergence. In West Bengal, the dominance of the Left Front and within it the growing domianance of the CPI (M) continued uninterrupted in the 1990s. But the party system was influenced by the logic of differentiation and reconfiguration. In the period of the Left's rise to power, West Bengal was a clear instance of competitive divergence leading to transformative politics. In the last decade, two developments have changed the categorization. The continued and overwhelming dominance of the CPI(M) and the splintering of the opposition makes West Bengal as the only case of one party hegemony in contemporary India. Over the years the Left has diluted its original agenda, its opponents have taken up some of its issues and thus the divergence has come down. In the case of Tamil Nadu, it was not so much the demise of the Congress system as the decline and split of the Congress party in the state that triggered party system reconfigurations. The last decade has seen the rise of many region and community based parties in Tamil Nadu, as has been the case in UP and Assam. In that sense there has been a move towards multipolarity that has ensured more space for smaller formations and interests. The recent practice of creating two grand alliances, on the lines of Kerala, under the leadership of DMK and the AIADMK would institutionalize the role of smaller parties. This would also bring the system one more step in the direction of convergence, now that the DMK has given up its old ideological positions.

That leaves the last category of states that have seen system-less competition in conditions of continued political fluidity. Haryana stands on the fringe of this category and its position seems to move from election to election. At the moment it appears less unstructured than before, but in the absence of any stable voter-party and leader-party relationship it could change. The entry of BJP in Goa seems to have reduced the level of fluidity and introduced an element of competitive divergence in the state. But if the state settles for a Congress-BJP bipolarity, the long term trend may be for a convergence. The BJP's entry in some hill states of the north east may have increased the role of national parties in the region, but has done little to change the conditions of fluidity. Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh continues to be the most fluid states in terms of their party system, while structures of competitive politics are emerging in Meghalaya and Mizoram. Tripura has had a stable 'two plus' system of competitive divergence that does not show signs of convergence on the ethnic question. Holding a fair and largely free election in Jammu and Kashmir and then in Nagaland may allow a system to develop in these places, but it is too early to comment on these states.

**Conclusions**

This preliminary overview of the evolution of party system at the state level brings to our attention a paradox. Our insistence on classifying party system in the Indian context along the two dimensions of the competitive format and the nature of choice set helps us define this paradox. On the one hand there is a trend towards opening of the competitive format: single party dominance is now an exception rather than the rule, a large number of states have shifted to a two party or two-plus party competition and there are many

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more multipolar systems than before. On the other hand, there is no clear trend of a corresponding expansion in the range and deepening of the nature of the choice set available to the citizens. If anything, the overall impression is that of stagnation or shrinkage in the choice set. Electoral politics does provide occasions for radical choices to be placed on the political menu. But such choices do not stay there for very long. The analysis offered above suggests something of a systemic 'drag' towards what we have called 'convergence', the tendency for the major players in the party political arena to become like one another and the gradual disappearance from the political agenda of issues with transformative potential.

A tension between these two dimensions of democratic politics has existed for quite some time. But the developments of the last decade in Indian politics have sharpened this contrast. The sudden collapse of the Congress hegemony opened a radical possibility of electoral political competition becoming an instrument of social transformation through effective use of the expanded choices that it was expected to offer. The experience has not born out this expectation. The emergence of state as the effective unit of political choice and the development of trends and patterns of state politics independent of one another did open up the stagnant party system for a reconfiguration. As a result of this reconfiguration, party political competition has become more intense. In some cases this new competitiveness has helped marginalized social groups get access to a voice or register their presence. On balance, however, it looks like a case of more and more competition about less and less. Attempts at transformative politics either do not get to

cross the entry barriers or are contained in a short span of time through various mechanisms of 'emptying' the party political space of its content.

Are we dealing here with a practical failure or is it a systemic outcome, something that is written in the logic of our kind of democracy? If it is a failure of political practice, what is the mechanism of incentives and disincentives that produces such a collective outcome? If, on the other, we are talking about a systemic phenomenon, which system are we talking about – the electoral system or the socio-economic system? What are the institutional constrains that account for the systemic 'drag'? We leave these questions for students of comparative democratic experience.