

**Parties and Political Stability in India: Problems and
Prospects**

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Parties and Political Stability in India: Problems and Future Prospects

Since their emergence in the late nineteenth century, political parties and party systems have been one of the most effective instruments for analysing social change and resultant political instability in a democratic polity. Existing literature shows that during periods of deep-seated differences and political crisis, parties due to their functions of interest articulation and aggregation, not only reflect changes in society, but can also actively intervene. By mobilising along the fault lines of social cleavages, parties can either contribute to aggravation of existing divisions; or by building a new national consensus on conflicting issues they can help in the re-establishment of stability and legitimacy in the political sphere (Durverger 1967). A third possible form of intervention is that of “elite accommodation” by party leaders across social groups, leading to the establishment of consociational democracy in countries, which have social diversities, that cannot be easily bridged. (Lijphart 1980)

Recent Indian experience points to the close link between rapid social change, breakdown of consensus on fundamental issues in society and the role of political parties, to deal with the resultant political instability. Since the late 1980s, India has undergone a number of significant developments in its polity, economy and society: breakdown of the consensus on socialism and secularism; rise of regional forces; the economic crisis of 1991 necessitating structural adjustment; social conflict due to implementation of the Mandal Commission report; communal mobilisation by the BJP based upon the ideology of Hindutva, which have adversely affected economic development and governance. These changes have created fragmentation and conflict within the electorate, leading to breakdown of the single party system dominant since independence, and transition towards a new and still evolving multi-party system. As a result, no party has gained a majority, India has experienced ‘hung parliaments’ following every national election in the 1990s and a series of unstable, short-lived coalition governments.

This paper critically analyses the role played by the two major parties - the Congress and the BJP - during the political instability in the 1990s. It focuses upon the attempt by these parties, following the breakdown of the single dominant party system, to introduce changes in their internal organisation, leadership, ideology and mobilisational strategies, in order to understand their *capabilities* and role in dealing with the prevailing political instability. Based upon this analysis it argues that their attempt to form stable coalition governments

have met with *limited* success. The BJP has been relatively more successful than the Congress party and consequently has been able to form a coalition following the 1996 and 1998 elections, though many problems remain.

The attempts by the BJP and the Congress party to remove instability and form a stable government in the 1990s has been analysed in the study over two phases. It argues that the phase from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, was one of *confrontation* between the major national parties when each believed it was possible by mobilisation - despite the changed political situation –to gain a majority and form a government alone. Consequently, parties mobilised along the fault lines of social cleavages and took strong positions on economic issues, creating fragmentation and conflict within the electorate. A series of short-lived coalition governments from 1996, led to a reappraisal and a better understanding of the situation by leaders of major parties. As a result, the second half of the 1990s have been a period of *moderation*, when parties have tried to abandon their confrontationist attitude, attempted to moderate their ideology, broaden their social base and form stable coalitions. A third contemporary phase is discernible in which, the BJP leadership is attempting - despite many internal challenges – *mainstreaming* of the party i.e. distancing itself from the Sangh Parivar and *Hindutva*; and the Congress to revive its organisation and develop a new ideological thrust on economic policies, by means of which both parties hope to form stable coalitions under their leadership in alliance with regional parties. A pointer to the fact that the period of instability is not yet over, is the fact that both parties still nourish hopes of capturing power alone in the future. The next two sections describe the role played by the two major parties over these two phases. The concluding section discusses how far parties have contributed to promoting stability, the limitations they face in their attempts, and future prospects for a stable multi-party system.

Parties in the period of confrontation

The late 1980s and early 1990s, were a period of political instability following the breakdown of the Nehruvian consensus and the Congress party, which had upheld it since independence. Two deeply divisive issues confronted the Indian polity: secularism and the economic crisis and required steps to meet it. The two major parties attempted through shifts in their ideology, organisation, social base and leadership to address these issues and thereby prevent instability.

The BJP and its politics of communalism

Although it emerged from the Janta party in 1980, the BJP is a reincarnation of the erstwhile Jan Sangh. (Jaffrelot 1996) As part of the Janata party in the 1970s, it had absorbed many prominent non-Jan Sangh members, and adopted Jayaprakash Narayan's "Gandhian Socialism" as its guiding philosophy; by which it had hoped to distance itself from the RSS and its affiliates. However, from 1986 onwards under the leadership of L.K.Advani, a hardliner with close links with the RSS and critical of the "psuedo secularism" and "minorityism" of the Congress party, the BJP gradually created a right-wing ideology of Hindu Nationalism or *Hindutva*. The party hoped not only to replace the Congress as the dominant party at the centre, but to create a strong, centralised *Hindu Rashtra* or nation, ruled on the principle of majoritarianism, in which the minorities would be integrated.

Due to the party's emphasis on *Hindutva*, a major weakness of the BJP ideology in this phase was the lack of a clear economic policy. The adoption of a SAP by the Narasimha Rao government led to the crystallisation of the BJP's policy of *Swadeshi*, which was enunciated in 1992 in a 50-page document "Humanistic Approach to Economic Development: A Swadeshi Alternative".¹ In this, *Swadeshi*² drawing upon the Humanism of Deen Dayal Upadhaya meant neither a completely closed nor a completely open economy but one where the main impulse for growth would come from within, and the role of foreign capital would be limited and used for specific sectors and national goals. While the party supported internal liberalisation, it was critical of the GATT and the New Economic Order that it argued was against the developing world. (Ghosh 1999: 284-85) The policy however lacked clarity and was open to many interpretations and by 1995 differences arose between the BJP, RSS and the SJM. While the former was not against globalisation but wanted protection of national interests; the latter organisations opposed all forms of foreign capital and globalisation as imperialism in a new garb; and stressed upon the need to develop indigenous technologies in isolation. Moreover, as a result of the need to distinguish its stand from that of the Congress there was an element of internal confusion within the BJP about how to make Indian industry

1 BJP Economic Policy Statement, 1992: Our Commitment to Antyodaya – Human Approach to Economic Development (A Swadeshi Alternative) New Delhi 1992.

2 Originally used during the Freedom movement, "Swadeshi" meant political and economic freedom from British colonialism. In the context of globalisation today it means "self-reliance" particularly protection of domestic economic interests.

competitive without exposing it to external competition. As a result BJP leaders often spoke in different voices. This contributed to the air of uncertainty surrounding economic policy in the early 1990s and thereby to instability.

The BJP leadership decided to base its mobilisational strategies for the 1989, and more particularly the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, upon the ideology of Hindutva and attempted by means of communal mobilisation, with the help of the the RSS and the VHP, to create a single, massive Hindu vote-bank in the North Indian states using the contentious issue of the Ram Temple/Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. (Pai 1994: 307-320) This strategy was also meant to counter the "Mandal" strategy created by the JD, which was described as an attempt to divide the Hindu community on caste lines. The BJP's ideological pronouncements and mobilisational strategies created deep divisions in Hindu society and alienated the Muslims. By this strategy the BJP successfully moved from a mere 2 seats in 1984 to 86 seats in 1989 and 120 in 1991, and from 7.4% in 1984, 11.36% in 1989 to 20.08% of the votes cast in 1991 in the Lok Sabha elections. (*ibid.*) However, no party gained a majority in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections.

By mid 1990s, particularly after the destruction of the Babri Mosque on 6th December 1992, the BJP leadership began to realise the limitations to communal mobilisation. The party had politically "exhausted" the Hindutva issue and exploited the support among its "natural" clientele i.e. upper caste Hindus, to saturation. Moreover, in north India caste-based identities proved to more important than religious identity, exemplified by the success of the Janta Dal in Bihar and the Samajwadi party and the BSP in Uttar Pradesh in the 1993 state assembly elections, representing the middle and backward castes. A large-scale survey in mid 1996, showed that Indian electors when asked whether they considered the demolition justified or not, of those willing to take a stand, 66.2% of urban, 67.5% of graduates and above, and 63.8% of Hindu upper castes found the act unjustified. (Mitra 1999: 145-46)

Consequently, prior to the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the party leadership realised that in order to gain a majority in the Lok Sabha it was imperative to project itself as a "responsible" national party, focus upon developmental issues, moderate its stand upon Hindutva and broaden its social base. It stressed that it stood for large-scale internal liberalisation and calibrated globalisation and declared that it would not oppose foreign capital and would honour all commitments made by the Congress to MNCs. Under the joint leadership of

Advani and Atal Behari Vajpayee a moderate leader, it decided in April 1995, to focus upon five issues in the Lok Sabha elections: Ayodhya temple issue, Article 370, infiltration of foreigners, the Uniform Civil Code and particularly, economic nationalism and *Swadeshi* following the scrapping of the Enron power project at Dabhol in Maharashtra by the Shiva-Sena/BJP government. The party put forward a two-fold agenda: Ayodhya and Mathura, based upon *cultural nationalism* to attract the stridently pro-temple upwardly mobile Hindu upper and middle castes mainly in the northern states; and *economic nationalism* together with the role of foreign capital in development, which would appeal to those in the Hindu community, who irrespective of ideology, believe in national "self respect". It was decided to broaden the party's appeal from the upper castes, to all sections of the Hindus specially Dalits, and support the Mandal Commission and woo the Muslims by creating a minorities cell in the party and organising sammelans with them in some states. (Pai 1996: 1175-76)

The BJP in this phase tried to form alliances with the AIADMK, Akali Dal(Badal), Harayana Vikas Manch of Bansi Lal, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Samata Party in Bihar and others. However, this was not done with the aim of forming a coalition, the party still hoped to form a government alone. The alliances were made to prevent these regional groupings from allying with either the Congress or the National Front and to enhance its "respectable image." However while the leadership attempted to give the BJP a new image, during the election campaign the party depended heavily on the RSS whose leadership in 1994 had gone into the hands of Rajendra Singh a hardliner who made full use of the Hindutva ideology and the temple issue.³ The BJP emerged as the single largest party gaining 179 seats, while the Congress performed very badly. But the BJP failed in its efforts to form a government, and regional parties were able to form a loose knit coalition under the leadership of Deve Gowda of the JD supported from outside by the Congress.

The Congress: a party in decline

In contrast to the BJP during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Congress party was in a phase of steady decline. The Congress in the post-independence period had a strong party "machine" and internal discipline, which began to be eroded in the 1960s. Under Mrs Indira Gandhi there had been gradual erosion of inner party democracy, increasing use of centralising institutional devices and interference in the working of state governments leading

3 Amulya Ganguli "Return of the Hardliners" Times of India, New Delhi, 25 April, 1994

to loss of autonomy, de-institutionalisation and even atrophy of the party organisation in the states in the 1980s. Despite its massive victories in 1980 and 1984, the party did not regain its dominant position in the Hindi heartland especially among the schedule castes and minorities, leading to progressive shrinking of its regional and social base in the states, providing space for the growth of regional/state parties.

The Congress party had been gradually reformulating its ideology on the twin contentious issues of economic development and secularism. Indira Gandhi made a clear shift towards the right on both the issues when she re-assumed power in 1980; hence, there was a progressive abandonment of the older platform of State interventionism and minority rights, which both Rajiv Gandhi and P.V.Narasimha Rao carried further. Despite this in terms of ideology the Congress had an advantage over the BJP as it was still seen as a secular party until the early 1990s. Moreover, the party began the economic reforms under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao and was able to meet the crisis of 1991. However, from the mid 1990s, after the exit of Rao, the party lacking a coherent economic ideology and strong leadership, constantly harped on the theme that it alone could provide 'stability and security' without really pointing out how this could be achieved.

Consequently, by the mid 1990s, the Congress party had lost its broad social and regional appeal and its ideological clarity particularly among the rank and file; it was also deeply divided over the pace and direction of the Structural Adjustment Programme. The Ayodhya problem, the issue of reservation for OBCs, the need for macroeconomic stabilisation versus the need for welfare schemes for the poor, the role of foreign capital in the development of the power sector all created contradictory pressures and underlay the poor performance of the party in the state assembly elections held after 1993. Ineffectual leadership, factionalism, and power struggles among senior leaders for control of the party organisation led to a split in May 1995, when a group of Congress members under the leadership of Arjun Singh and N.D.Tewari left to form the Congress (T). This further weakened the base of the party in the states prior to the 1996 elections, providing room for the national opposition and regional and state level parties. (Ibid:)

The Regional Experiment

The deep divisions within the body politic, that were exacerbated by the communal mobilisation of the BJP which failed to form a government and the collapse of the Congress,

encouraged regional parties to join hands and experiment with a 'third front' distinct from either the declining Congress or the 'communal' BJP. They had the example of the National Front (NF), a "federation" of national and regional parties formed in October 1988 under the leadership of the Janta Dal, which was a reflection of the fragmentation and re-alignment within the party system along regional lines.⁴ In August 1990, the NF government by announcing acceptance and speedy implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, had contributed to existing divisions and caste and communal conflicts in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections. Following the collapse of the NF government in 1990, the Front went into oblivion and the various constituents, except for some seat adjustments, fought the 1991 elections alone. From September 1995 onwards, encouraged by the poor performance of the Congress party in the 1994/95 state assembly elections, efforts were made to form a new regional Front by the TDP, JD and the ruling Left Front in West Bengal, by uniting the non-Congress secular forces.

Two major issues made it impossible to form a strong Front. First differences over the inclusion of regional parties such as the BSP, AIADMK, AGP with differing ideologies could not be resolved. Second, was the failure to formulate a "common minimum programme". While all partners were agreed upon social issues such as secularism and social justice, issues such as foreign investment, role of the private sector, and entry of multinational corporations led to rejection of the ideological paper titled "Towards New Politics," prepared at the initiative of the JD in July 1995. Another document "Towards New Politics: Agenda for a Third Force" which was prepared by a group of intellectuals and rejected any dilution of the role of the state in the economy, also failed to satisfy some members of the Front. Finally, the JD, SP, and the Left parties decided to adopt only a joint declaration on a common "Secular Democratic Alternative Programme." The major thrust of the Front, hence, was a desire to defeat the BJP and the Congress and it remained merely a divided array of parties that could not constitute a cohesive force, its greatest weakness being the lack of a strong leader who could unite its disparate members. (Pai 1996: 1178)

Due to no party being able to gain a majority in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, two short-lived, unstable, coalition governments were formed by the United Front, headed by Deve

⁴ The NF consisted of the JD, TDP, Congress(S), Dravida Munetra Kazagham (DMK), Assam Ganatantra Parishad (AGP) and other smaller groupings. (Pai 1996:1178)

Gowda and I.K.Gujral with the outside support of the Congress. Two contentious issues in both were attempts to formulate a common economic programme and the inter-relationship among the partners. The failure of these two experiments in the mid 1990s, led to a realisation that a combination of national and regional parties was required to form a stable coalition at the centre.

Parties in a Period of Moderation

The BJP: a "responsible" national party

The collapse of the BJP government headed by Atal Behari Vajpayee after the 1996 Lok Sabha election in only thirteen days because no party was prepared to form a coalition with a party deemed anti-secular and 'untouchable', inaugurated a *moderate* phase. Due to this episode the BJP leadership made two decisions. First, they decided to project a 'softer' Hindu ideology and broaden the *social* base of the party by gaining the votes of the lower castes. Second, broaden its *regional* base by forming alliances/coalitions with regional and state level parties and thereby form a coalition at the centre. The aim of the party shifted from emerging as an alternative to the Congress and capturing power alone, to heading a coalition at the centre. It decided to form strategic alliances with regional parties on a common minimum programme shorn of the BJP's core Hindutva issue. Ideological and organisational changes were effected with this in mind.

In the 1998 elections the BJP leadership tried not to use its Hindutva platform and put emphasis on economic issues such as "Swadeshi". The party now projected Atal Behari Vajpayee long known as the *moderate face* of the BJP as its prime ministerial candidate, adopting the slogan "stable government able PM". Vajpayee in six election meetings addressed in major towns in Uttar Pradesh in late January, made no reference to the Ayodhya issue and concentrated on the price of onions, problems of sugarcane farmers, the Bofors kickback scandal, and tried to reassure Muslims they had nothing to fear from the BJP. (Pai 1998(a): 1842) During his campaign speeches the BJP president L.K. Advani also emphasised upon stability as the main plank of his party, corruption in high places coming a close second.⁵ The party manifesto did mention that the BJP would build the Ram Temple

⁵ "Choice Between BJP and Instability" The Hindu, New Delhi, January 23, 1998.

but by exploring, “consensual legal and constitutional means”. However, it mentioned that this issue, along with the demand for a Common Civil Code and abrogation of article 370 rescinding the special status granted to Kashmir etc., could be dropped after achieving victory if a coalition had to be formed, and the Common Minimum Programme would rest upon consensus.⁶ In his election meeting at Ayodhya, Advani did reiterate that the temple would be built, but he underlined that there was a change in attitude towards this issue among the minority community and the people at large. (Ibid.)

The disintegration of the United Front following the fall of the Gujral government, on 28 November 1997, created a bi-polar situation at the centre. The Congress and the BJP emerged as the two main contenders and regional parties regrouped themselves around these two poles by forming pre-and post alliances. The leaders of both the Congress and the BJP, made two conscious efforts to gain a majority and avoid the instability following the previous elections. They made ideological and organisational changes in their parties formally and publicly during the campaign, and second pre-poll alliances with regional/state parties with the firm commitment to share power with them at the centre. The voters on the other hand, in a collective and decisive manner, rejected unstable regional coalitions; identified two main contenders, and confined their preferences to them. (Pai 1998(b): 840)

Due to its bitter experience after the 1996 elections when it did not gain the support of any party, the BJP moved early and vigorously, to a search for allies. These were necessary because its own growth had hit a plateau with a less than 10 percent increase of its seat tally. Vertical alliances were formed by the BJP and the INC with regional and state parties. The BJP benefited to a greater extent as individuals and groups interested in the formation of a stable coalition saw it as the stronger of the two main contenders, and less and less as untouchable or anti-secular. The seats and votes obtained by the BJP’s allies in their respective states are given in Table I. It gained 21, 30 and 16 seats from its pre-poll allies in the northern, southern and western regions respectively. They provided the BJP with crucial seats in regions where it had no base, and prevented division of votes, enabling it to achieve a majority in the Lok Sabha. Following the elections, the BJP gained the support of four regional parties - the most important being the Telegu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh led by

6 BJP Manifesto, The Hindu, New Delhi, February, 1998.

Chandra Babu Naidu - formerly a strong constituent of the UF - and a few independents, which gave it 22 more seats and thereby a majority in Parliament.

Table I
BJP and its Allies

<u>Parties</u>		<u>seat</u>	<u>vote</u>
I BJP (National)		179	25.47
<u>II Allies Pre-poll (Seats and Votes in the States)</u>			
AIADMK	Tamilnadu	18	25.89
Samata	Bihar	10	16.02
Samata	UP	2	0.79
BJD	Orissa	9	27.5
Akali Dal	Punjab	8	32.93
Trinamul	W Bengal	7	24.43
Shiv Sena	Maharashtra	6	19.66
PMK	Tamilnadu	4	6.05
MDMK	Tamilnadu	3	6.25
Lok Shakti	Karnataka	3	11.5
HVP	Haryana	1	11.6
TRC	Tamilnadu	1	NA
Janata	Tamilnadu	1	1.04
Independents	Rajasthan	1	3.9
	UP	1	2.79
	Punjab	1	4.91
Sub-total		256	
<u>Post-poll allies</u>			
HLD(R)	Haryana	4	25.9
Arunachal Congress	Arunachal	2	52.47
SDF	Sikkim	1	65.72
Independents	Assam	1	9.51
Anglo-Indians	TN & Kar	2	Nominated
Telegu Desam	Andhra	12	31.97
Sub-total		22	
Grand Total		278	

Source: Compiled from "Statistical Report on General Elections 1998 to the 12th Lok Sabha" Vol I, Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

Once in power, the BJP continued its efforts to moderate its ideology in order to ensure the smooth functioning of a stable government. At its two-day National Executive meeting at New Delhi on April 11, Advani asked partymen to shelve the core idea of Hindutva in the interests of a stable coalition government at the centre and create a "New softer, BJP". This meant that henceforth stability would be more important than any ideological issue, and the National Agenda formed with allies, would prevail over the BJP's own election manifesto.

Advani's speech changed the party's definition of nationalism until now synonymous with Hindutva and building of a *Hindu* Ram Mandir (temple) in Ayodhya, to building a "Rashtra Mandir" i.e. a national temple - a prosperous and secure country for all citizens. It also signaled the need for a new national consensus and healing of any divisions which may have appeared in the body politic.⁷ Regarding economic issues from 1998 onwards, the party leadership decided that 'second generation' reforms in sectors such as Banking, Finance, Insurance etc. would begin and decided to disinvest in sick industries as well. It moved closer to the policies of the Congress and away from the SJM and the RSS. Regarding economic policies, voters no longer identified it as a right-wing party.

However, despite these efforts, the BSP-headed coalition government at the Centre lasted only till April 1999. It faced problems from within its own party, its affiliates and regional allies. Within the party there were differences over economic policy and pressure from the RSS and the VHP to build the Ram Temple. The party was internally divided over the question of abandoning *Hindutva*, a section arguing that by doing so it would lose its distinct ideology and social base, an argument that has appeal among the rank and file. Kalyan Singh, chief minister of the politically important state of Uttar Pradesh where the BJP was in power, after the elections held that the party has not and cannot shed its Hindutva ideology. An important leader of the VHP in the same state Vinay Katiyar, argued that the BJP has only temporarily kept it aside as it is heading a coalition government.⁸ Findings by left parties, of large-scale construction activity near the disputed site in Ayodhya, raised fears of a "hidden agenda" to build a Ram Mandir despite denials by BJP leaders.⁹ Demands by its allies to impose president's rule in some states¹⁰ or reduce the price of politically important products, such as petrol and urea, during the Budget session, created acute problems for the BJP.¹¹ As a result the coalition broke down within a year and as the Congress failed to form an alternative coalition, elections became inevitable.

7 "Advani Promises 'New' Softer BJP" The Indian Express, New Delhi, April 12, 1997.

8 The statements were made in an interview after the elections, Indian Express, New Delhi, March 22, 1998.

9 The Times of India, New Delhi, June 15, 1998

10 Jayalalitha leader of the AIADMK claimed that the BJP leadership had promised dissolution of the DMK government while forming the alliance. The Times of India New Delhi, June 20, 1998.

A major problem which contributed to instability was that the alliances/coalitions formed with regional and other opposition parties were neither 'ideological' nor did they have any common cementing objective, being short-term strategic arrangements by ambitious politicians based upon mutual benefits and compulsions of power. Regional parties too allied with the BJP or Congress to improve their political position in their own states, and increase their bargaining power with the centre, thereby identifying the former as their primary and the latter as their secondary arena. Moreover, while entering into coalitions regional parties preserved their distinct identity, ideology and agenda. Both the Congress and the BJP also viewed these alliances/coalitions as temporary, their main aim being to gain a majority on their own in the next election. (Pai 1998(b): 850) The BJP also suffered from severe factionalism, which was due to the phenomenal growth of the party, territorially, socially and politically, leading to indiscipline. Described as the *Congressization* of the BJP it stems from the shift from a strict, exclusive cadre based party to a large, unwieldy mass party, within a little over a decade. The party has grown from a membership of 15 lakhs in 1980 to 2 crores by the late 1990s.¹² In a number of states the organisational and mass wings of the party are locked in a power struggle for control over the party machinery and funds. The hardliners argue that it is the result of dilution of the ideology and social base of the party.

Despite differences within the party and among the allies, the 1999 Lok Sabha elections brought the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) headed by the BJP to power. The BJP and its allies gained 296 seats and 41.3% votes; the Congress and its allies gained only 134 seats but 34.7% of the vote which was 3.4% more than in the last election, while the remaining parties obtained a total of 107 seats and 23.9% which is 36 seats and 5% of the votes less than in the previous election. Yet, despite the organisational and ideological changes introduced by the leadership, the BJP alone gained only 182 seats, the Congress dropped to a historic low with 112, the remaining seats going to other parties. In fact, regional parties were able to capture 37% of the seats and form a substantial section of the NDA.¹³ Hence the elections -

11 The Finance Minister agreed to reduction of price of both commodities within 24 hours of the demands being made in parliament during the budget session.

12 India Today August 14, 2000: 44

13 . The Hindu, New Delhi, October 8, 1999.

despite the NDA gaining a majority - did not constitute a departure from previous Lok Sabha elections.

Following the success of the BJP in forming a coalition after the 1998 and 1999 elections, the moderates under the leadership of Vajpayee have emerged as a powerful group. Heading a better organised and more stable coalition, this faction is attempting *mainstreaming* of the party i.e. removing its exclusive social base and ideology and making it into a broad-based party which enjoys the support of all sections of society. They took a number of organisational and ideological steps to consolidate their control over the party at the Nagpur session of the party in September 2000. The most important step was the appointment of Bangaru Laxman a former Union minister of state and close aide of Vajpayee, rather than Jana Krishnamurthy a representative of the hardliners in the party. Laxman, a member of the RSS, is a *dalit* from Andhra Pradesh, who headed the All-India BJP Schedule Caste Morcha for seven years and has been vice-president of the party. The moderates hope under his leadership to impose discipline over the party rank and file and broaden its social and regional support, so that the party can reach the 300 mark in the next election and come to power on its own. In a bid to curb dissidence and foster unity, the leadership also reinstated many important leaders in the party such as Sushma Swaraj, M.L.Khurana and Sahib Singh Verma to ministerial posts.

A second step was further dilution of the Hindutva ideology by passing a resolve to bring the Muslims closer to the party and gain their votes. The moderates argued that without support from the Muslims a clear mandate to rule cannot be gained, and called upon all members to work towards this end. They have also tried to refurbish the party's commitment to "social justice". The results of the 1999 national as well as panchayat and state-level elections indicate that the party has not been able to consolidate its hold over the OBCs and dalits due to pressure from the brahmin group, particularly in UP. The new president in his speech, underlined the need for reservations in the private sector for dalits, OBCs and tribals, pointing out that this sector must also pay the cost of the affirmative action by earmarking a section of jobs for the latter. The moderate leadership also used the Nagpur conclave to overcome the divide in the party over economic policies. They attempted to shift the debate from 'swadeshi versus liberalisation' to faster growth and how to achieve it. The Economic Resolution in a forthright manner supported the ongoing disinvestment exercise by the party leadership and described disinvestment as an "imperative of the times", and an "instrument" for

transforming assets, which have been a drain on the exchequer, into more productive assets and redirecting the state's role in the economy.¹⁴ The new president described Swadeshi in the present context, as neither blind acceptance nor opposition to globalisation, but as an effective strategy to further national interests by seizing the opportunities and resisting challenges presented by it. The party leadership, stressed on the need for faster reforms which by accelerating economic growth, were described as the crucial guarantor of social justice for the disadvantaged.

The Congress party: attempts at revival

The second half of the 1990s witnessed a further decline of the Congress party, though attempts were made to revive the Congress party. The single most important development that led to organisational change in the Congress party, was the decision of Sonia Gandhi to assume control of the party organisation and its electoral campaign prior to the 1996 national elections. Prior to this the Congress appeared to have been reduced to an insignificant force, which it was generally believed would receive less seats and votes than in 1996, and finish third after the BJP and the UF. Her entry stopped factionalism, resignations, and defections from the party, and gave a tremendous impetus to its campaign, revitalising a demoralised leadership and rank-and-file. Her meetings throughout the country were well attended and electors were receptive to her speeches, which encouraged party workers who had earlier lost hopes to work with enthusiasm.

While it is difficult to assess accurately, the impact of Sonia Gandhi's campaign varied across states depending upon the condition of the party machinery. Where the Congress organisation was in a decline and faced firmly entrenched forces as for example in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, it had little or no impact. However in states such as Maharashtra, Andhra and Karnataka and to some extent Rajasthan where there was an anti-incumbency factor, lack of cohesion within the BJP or a weak opposition, the Sonia factor was significant.¹⁵ Though the crowds did not translate into votes, her campaign succeeded in checking further erosion of Congress support, halting the momentum of the BJP and contributing to the collapse of the UF, but it could not enable the Congress to catch up with the BJP.

14 . Economic Times, New Delhi, 28 August 2000

15 K.K.Katyayal,"Sonia Factor Varied From State to State" The Hindu New Delhi, February 11, 1998.

This was because the Congress party unlike in the early 1990s, when economic reforms was a central policy, was singularly bereft of any significant issue to place before the electors. The main plank of the party was that due to its past heritage, *it alone could provide stability*, and the BJP was a ‘fascist’ Hindutva party bent upon dividing the country. During the campaign the Congress made an attempt to remove its past ambivalence on issues such as Ayodhya by apologising to the minorities for the destruction of the Babri Mosque, and showing greater commitment to the underprivileged by giving tickets to lower and backward caste candidates. While the BJP moved from the far right to the centre, the Congress tried to move a little to the left. (Pai 1998(b): 844)

After the elections, Sonia Gandhi continued her efforts to revive the party from the grassroots by bringing in new members. A number of changes were announced at the one-day All India Congress Committee (AICC) session held on April 6, to revamp the party organisation. The most important being the setting up of a six-member Task Force under P.A. Sangma, to study the suggestions made for strengthening the party during the AICC.¹⁶ On April 27, as Congress President, Sonia Gandhi in a major re-organisation of the party abolished the post of Vice-President of the All India Congress Committee, though she retained all six General Secretaries. Senior members of the Congress Working Committee including Chief Ministers of states, were replaced by younger members such as Rajesh Pilot and Sushil Kumar Shinde, who were expected to play a dynamic role in revamping the party.¹⁷

The ability of the Congress party to adjust to the new situation has been lower than the BJP because, until recently, the party leadership and rank-and-file was against alliances or coalitions and believed it could come to power alone. Unlike the BJP, it failed to grasp the importance of making alliances prior to the 1998 elections. A Political Resolution adopted at its Calcutta plenary session in August 1997 under the leadership of President Sitaram Kesri, rejecting coalitions as unstable, underlined that

16 “Sangma Will Lead Operation Clean-up” Indian Express New Delhi, April 12, 1998.

17 The Times of India, New Delhi, April 28, 1998.

“the Congress party has the will and capacity to ensure and acquire the support of the people of this country for a viable and stable one-party government in the country.”¹⁸

Table II shows that except in Maharashtra and Bihar, prior to the elections, it attracted only small groups marginal in their own states, from whom it obtained 30 seats. No party extended support to the Congress after the elections.

<u>Congress party and its Allies</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Vote</u>
II Congress party	National	141	25.88
<u>II Pre-Poll Allies in the states</u>			
RJD	Bihar	17	26.29
RPI	Maharashtra	4	4.14
IUML	Kerala	2	5.01
RJP	Bihar	1	0.97
Kerala Congress (M)	Kerala	1	2.4
Majlis I Muslimeen	Andhra	1	1.52
United Minority Front	Assam	1	4.27
United Parlia Front	Mizoram	1	NA
Manipur state Cong	Manipur	1	25.39
Total		171	

Source: same as Table I

In the contemporary phase, the Congress party has made two kinds of attempts. First, it set up a committee to look into the economic reforms and the position that the party should take on issues such as, disinvestment, changes in the Insurance sector, measures to rein in inflation, power sector reforms, etc. Second, it has made attempts to put its own house in order by holding organisational elections. The latter, has been very difficult due to the lack of control over the state branches by the Central leadership and the infighting within each state. This is seen in West Bengal where the party factions are not sure whether to align with the Trinamool Congress, UP where it is torn apart by two factions headed by Salman Khurshid and Jitendra Prasad, and in TN where the party is divided over its relationship with the AIADMK. Thus, the Congress has not been able to improve its organisational structure and impose discipline. Weak leadership and inability to throw up a post-Nehru/Gandhi dynasty leadership, has been an important factor.

¹⁸ Political Resolution adopted at the plenary session of the Congress party, held at Calcutta on August 9-10, 1997. The Hindu New Delhi, August 11, 1997.

Conclusion

Our study has examined the relationship between rapid socio-economic change, emergence of deep-seated differences, and the role played by political parties to deal with instability, in the Indian context. It shows that attempts by two major parties, the Congress and the BJP, to deal with the prevailing instability in the 1990s, by introducing change in their ideology, internal organisation, leadership and mobilisational strategies in order to capture power alone, or in coalition with other parties, has met with only limited success. The reasons lie in the inability of political parties and their leaders to adapt to multi-partyism following collapse of the single party system, the internal capabilities of the BJP and the Congress to deal with the ensuing instability and demands by regional parties for a share in central governance.

A major problem is that on the one hand, both the Congress and the BJP, despite the fragmentation of the electorate and breakdown of the single party system, still nurture ambitions of coming to power alone. Regionalisation of the party system has made this impossible, necessitating coalitions between national and regional parties. On the other hand, regional parties, despite demanding a share in central governance, still treat the regional political arena as the primary arena in order to strengthen their position in their own home states. There is greater realisation after the mid 1990s, of the necessity of forming stable and broad-based coalitions inclusive of all social classes and regions, but differences between parties has made this difficult. As a result, coalitions formed during the 1990s have been unstable and short-lived. Internal divisions and unreasonable demands by allies, plague the present NDA headed by the BJP as in the past, making the working of a coalition very difficult. In short, a *coalition culture* has not yet developed, affecting the attempt by parties to work together within a government, and making the shift towards a multi-party system difficult.

Internally both parties face problems, which have affected their capability to deal with instability following the collapse of the single party system. Despite attempts since the mid 1990s, the BJP has not emerged as a 'responsible' national party and will face difficulties in its continuing efforts. This is because the party is deeply divided between the moderates and hard-liners, who are agreed upon the goal of coming to power alone, but have differences over ideological and mobilisational questions, such as, whether to use the Hindutva ideology, remain an exclusive party of the upper castes or one inclusive of the backwards and the

dalits, and the relationship it should seek, in the shorter term, with other parties. The Congress, due to failure to rejuvenate itself, has a much lower ability to adapt to the changed situation organisationally and ideologically. Consequently, it is experiencing factionalism, decline and decay of the party machinery, lack of a coherent economic ideology and weak leadership, rendering it incapable of winning elections or attracting partners in order to form a coalition. Failure to throw up lower and backward caste leaders in a period when social identities have become important, has marginalised and de-legitimated the party in many parts of the country, making revival of its base an almost impossible task.

In this scenario, no political party in future can emerge as a dominant party on the lines of the Congress in the past. The reasons for the development of the Congress into an all-India party, dominant both at the centre and in a large number of the states, in such a vast and diverse country, lie in the peculiar circumstances under which it was formed in the colonial period. The presence of the imperial power brought political leaders onto a common platform their main aim being to attain independence; all other social and economic problems were to be solved later. Hence, the Congress developed into a broad movement that enabled it to be identified with the newly formed Indian State. After independence, no party has been able to develop into an all-India party with a base in all the major regions, as existing diversities between regions have sharpened and crystallised with formation of linguistic states and the impact of democratisation and regionalisation. In the states, distinct party systems, which have a complex inter-locking relationship with the national party system, have developed.

Nor are we heading towards a two-party system, despite the fact that the BJP and the Congress are at present two major parties confronting each other at the centre. The Westminster system, of two parties alternating in power is suited only to small countries with a homogenous population with no major cultural differences. In India, regionalisation of politics, which has led to strong regional parties based on specific regional identities, has made this impossible. The single party system described by scholars such as Rajni Kothari and Morris Jones has now been replaced by a highly fragmented multi-party system in which both national and regional parties are playing an important role. Hence, India has entered into a period of transition towards a more stable multi-party system, during which political instability will continue, as coalitions made up of ideologically disparate parties will govern at the centre. During this period three central issues, on which parties are divided, will continue to cause instability: economic policies, secularism and ascriptive identities based

upon caste. With the breakdown of the earlier consensus on state-led growth and the move towards a market-oriented system, there is at present little agreement among parties on the future path of economic development. We cannot expect parties with clear 'left' or 'right' ideologies to emerge; but a consensus is gradually building up on the necessity of economic reform to deal with both internal problems such as budget deficits and external forces of globalisation. Pragmatism rather than sharp ideological differences between parties will emerge; nevertheless, differences will remain on specific policies and their implementation requiring negotiation and compromise. A similar pragmatic attitude will also emerge on the ideology of Hindutva and role of the state in the religious affairs of communities, with increasing acceptance of India as a multi-cultural state by all political groups. The proliferation of parties based upon newly emergent low caste identities in the states is due to exclusion of disadvantaged social groups, such as the Dalits and the Lower Backward Caste groups, in the past. Their inclusion into the national mainstream is gradually taking place and will lead to more stable political realignments.

In this period of transition two kinds of changes are required to ensure stable governance: internal reform of parties and the development of a stable multi-party system. Both ideas have entered the public discourse and are also being extensively discussed within parties. Their importance has been recognised and the Indian polity is moving towards them though at a very slow pace. The importance of stability for completing the process of reform and putting India on a higher plane of economic growth has also been realised. These changes are required within national and regional parties as the latter will increasingly play an important role in the new evolving system. Internal reform will ensure free flow of information, rise of new leaders based on merit and not factionalism, inclusion of new social groups and transparency of functioning within parties. The internal reform of parties leading to institutionalisation of intra-party democracy is closely tied up with the development of a stable multi-party system. The fragmentation of the party system, the prospect of unstable coalitions, the weakening of democratic accountability, the inability of parties to transcend their narrow social bases is rooted in the kind of party structures that have grown. Ideological reformulation on the three issues identified above is also required and will arise out of internal discussion, negotiation and compromise within parties. It is out of such changes that new leadership will emerge within all parties, that is more responsible and capable.

However, India need not develop a multi-party system, on the pattern of the countries on the European Continent. Given the fact that our cultural diversities are regionally arranged, in the long run a multi-party system, in which parties - including 'national' parties such as the Congress and the BJP - based in states/regions and compete for power at the centre, could be the system that will provide stability. Yet, coalitions will be necessary in this system, and to ensure stability parties will have to make changes internally in their ideology and organisation, and in their relationship with each other. The shifting, unstable, and often irreconcilable, political patterns of regionalisation and bipolarity constantly produced by electoral politics, indicate a move towards the creation of a new national identity and consensus - more inclusive and understanding of regional and cultural differences - following the decline of the idea of a single, socialist and secular nation, which was the legacy of the national movement. This positive development - which will ensure a stable multi-party system - for both nation and state will not happen overnight. As it is taking place in a democracy it will emerge over the course of many elections and will create instability in the shorter term. At the same time, our study indicates a gradual "process of learning" on the part of our political class, particularly the leadership within parties. Since the mid 1990s all parties, including regional parties, have made attempts – with different degrees of success – to avoid conflicts and build bridges with other parties in an effort to create workable coalitions. This is not an easy task as it necessitates overcoming narrow and selfish interests and developing larger common interests and goals. However, the process has begun and holds promise for the future.

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