CHAPTER - III

PARTY SYSTEM IN INDIA : NATURE AND DYNAMICS
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Party system in underdeveloped and developing nations is primarily a product of historical process. While western political parties emerged as "internally created" phenomena in response to growing democratisation, political parties in developing societies emerged "externally created" institutions for the primary purpose of fighting for national independence and subsequently enjoyed the responsibility for running the government. In most of these newly liberated countries, the nationalist parties developed themselves into one-party systems. But the political developments in India moved in a different and unique direction. India opted for a political system largely determined by English pattern and marginally influenced by the U.S. system. However, the system that developed in India became different in essence from the contemporary ones. The political process resulted in a peculiar type of party system rather than one party system that smacks of a non-competitive totalitarian model.

The development of Indian party system can be traced to the freedom movement days which resulted in the wide ranging political recruitment, vast political socialisation and mobilisation of the masses. The Indian National Congress led the freedom struggle more as a mass movement for political emancipation than as a political party. The ideological multiplicity and other contradictions within the Congress itself resulted in the development of parallel political parties/movements. Ultimately, the Congress could not develop into one-party system though it had been the most important instrument for national independence.

Indian party system does not easily fit into any rigid typological illustration. Superficially, India presents the spectacle of a multi-party system by virtue of sheer number of political parties that join the electoral fray and several parties have had a chance of enjoying power in several states and thrice at the centre either singly or in coalitions.
But the multi-party system obtaining in India is basically different from that prevalent in western countries like France and Italy. In a model multi-party system seldom any single party is able to obtain majority of seats in the legislature and such a system is more often than not results in the formation of a coalition government. India marks a departure from such a model. Some scholars have designated the party system as "one dominant party system". The concept was popularised in the sixties by W H Morris Jones and Rajni Kothari. As per their classic studies, a dominant party system is a multi-party system, in which free competition among parties occurred but in which the Indian National Congress enjoyed a dominant position, both in terms of the number of seats that it held in Parliament in New Delhi and the state legislative assemblies, and in terms of its immense organisational strength outside the legislature.

For a basic elucidation of the term, one has to go to Maurice Duverger who used the expression as early as 1951. In his view a party is dominant, if it displays the following two characteristics in a two-party or multi-party system: (a) It clearly outdistances its rivals over an extended period of time (even if occasionally sustaining an electoral defeat), and (b) it identifies itself with the nation as a whole, its doctrines, ideas and even its style coincide with those of the times. The electoral success and the working of the Congress party during the first twenty years after independence prompted Morris Jones to characterise the Indian party system as that of one party dominance. Rajni Kothari also described the Indian party system as one-party dominance. The Indian system comprises a party of consensus and parties of pressure. The parties of pressure function on the margin though they do not hold an alternative to the ruling party.

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1 Various terms like one party dominant system, 'one party dominance', or 'one dominant party system', have been used to connote the same meaning.
Tho Congress in India was the party of consensus functioning with fictions inside the party itself, and its nature was of political competition in the Indian system. Kothari writes "The model of one party dominance always provided a considerable role to opposition parties and internal dissidence, including the opposition in power in one or more states; it always operated on the basis of dominant electoral support and not majority electoral support. N D. Palmer held that the epithet "one dominant party system" was generally accepted but even at the height of Congress dominance, it was partially accurate And the Opposition parties reflected many facets of Indian political life that were not always embraced in the Congress and exercised an influence out of proportion to their electoral success.

Precisely, Indian party system experiences dominance coexisting with competition but without a trace of alternation. The Opposition parties confine themselves to a role "quite distinctive.. instead of providing an alternative to the Congress party, they function by influencing sections within Congress They oppose by making Congressmen oppose Groups within the ruling party assume the role of Opposition parties, often quite openly reflecting the ideologies and interests of other parties The later influence political decision-making at the margin.

On the whole, the Congress occupied the broad center of the political spectrum as well as most of the left and right Moreover it occupied most of the space in the political system because "there [was] plurality within the dominant party which [made] it more representative, [provided] flexibility, and [estimated] internal

6 Rajni Kothari, Politics and the People, Vol 1, New Delhi, Ajanta, 1990, p 63
7 N D. Palmer, The Indian Political System, Houghton, Mifflin Co , 1971, p 205
8 Atul Kohli, (ed ), Op Cit , p 64
9 Rajni Kothari, "Form and Substance in Indian Politics", Economic Weekly, April-May 1961, p 849
At the same time, it [was] prepared to absorb groups and movements from outside the party and thus prevent other parties from strength" 10

The Indian party system, even during the height of Congress party's power and influence, represents the democratic model allowing elements of opposition leading to the existence of a multi-party system. It is competitive in character in as much as it permits political struggle among a number of parties which function within the four corners of the constitution.

In this, the one party dominance in India is only different from the one-dominant party systems of Ghana, Mexico, Algeria and Egypt. The Indian system is democratic and constitutional. The one-party dominance system in India is marked by in-built corrective and restraining force provided by factionalism within the Congress and occasional threats from without (the Opposition parties). The Congress maintained an "umbrella" character and tried to build "consensus" and in this process accommodated various shades of political ideas and interests. In course of a long tenure as the ruling party, the Congress has developed an internal identifiable structure. Plurality within the Congress had sustained internal competitions and the various factions interacted" in a continuous process of pressure, adjustment and accommodation to provide an in-built opposition".11

The party system in India has passed through nine distinct phases which have a bearing on the epithet "one-party dominance system." These are: (1) the 1947-62 era of Nehru's undisputed supremacy in the country and the total dominance of the Congress party, (2) the period between 1963-71 with political authority at the centre under the Congress enfeebled, first by the debacle in the war with China, then by the succession struggle for Prime Ministership in

11 Rajni Kothari, "Party System", in Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, June 3, 1961, p 849
May 1964 and in January 1966 and later by the emergence of multi-party government in some states as a result of the Fourth General Elections in 1967, (3) the period between 1971 and March 1977 which signalled the return to one party dominance with a new political stability under Mrs Gandhi, (4) the period between 1977 and 1980 which brought the major non-Congress parties at the centre and in most of the states, (5) the fantastic political rehabilitation of Mrs Gandhi and Congress (I) since the Seventh General Elections of 1980, (6) Sweeping for the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi and political wilderness for the national Opposition consequent upon the Eighth General Elections of December 1984, (7) a novel experiment of alliance government of National Front led by Janata Dal with critical support of the opposite political groups, the BJP and the left parties, (8) the resurgence of the Congress (I) as the single largest party at the centre in the aftermath of the Tenth Lok Sabha Elections held during May-June 1991 with the BJP as the main Opposition party, and finally (9) the emergence of BJP as the first ever rightist single largest party as well as the rise of the regional parties in the wake of Eleventh and Twelfth Lok Sabha Elections and the consequent polarisation of the so called secular forces. Each of these phases needs some elaboration

The first phase can be described as the Nehru era and of one-party dominance. Although there were three groups functioning within the Congress, namely, the leftist, the rightists and the centrists, intra-party mobility and rivalry within the party was nominal during this period. The national Opposition consisted mainly of the Socialist Parties, the Communist Parties, the Bharatiya Jana Sangha and the Swatantra. The Praja Socialist Party (PSP) emerged as the largest Opposition party in the parliament after the First General Elections in 1952. Split in the party led to severe battering of the Socialist parties in the Second and Third General Elections. The Communist Party of India was particularly strong in West Bengal, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh since the First General Elections. In Kerala a Communist government was in power from April 1957 to July 1959. The party has been weakened by personal and ideological differences of its leaders.
which climaxed in a split in July 1964. Until 1959 the Jana Sangha was virtually the one party in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh after the Third General Elections. The Swatantra Party formed in 1959 under the leadership of C. Rajgopalchari was the "first democratically oriented conservative party of any importance in India." Although its national leadership was secular, nationalist and moderate, most of its state units were in the grip of former princes or feudal lords. Some of the regional parties which came into prominence during this period were the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Muslim League in parts of Madras and Kerala, the Republican Party and Peasants' and Workers Party in Maharashtra, the Ganatantra Parishad in Orissa and the Jharkhand party in Bihar and Orissa.

The second phase in Indian party politics began in 1963 as the political dominance of the Centre under the Congress Party became enfeebled by the decline of Nehru's authority. With the death of Nehru, succession struggles for Prime Ministership began and the climax was reached by the Fourth General Elections of 1967 which ended the political supremacy of the Congress for at least four years. The outstanding result of this election has been "the collapse of the erstwhile pattern of one party dominance of the Congress party and the exposér of the artificial level of political stability, democratic maturity and parliamentary sophistication at which the political system had so far appeared to be operating." 12 1967 represents a major step in the direction of an increasingly competitive polity. The Congress retained control at the centre with a much reduced strength. In eight of the seventeen states, non-Congress government were installed. However, the stability of Opposition power based on coalition politics was more ephemeral than at first appeared. The very fluidity of political alignments led to the "politics of defection" characterised by rampant opportunism and personal ambition of the leaders.

The Fourth General Elections had given the non-Congress

parties a unique opportunity to form a cohesive political unit which could serve as a new restraint upon the Congress party and provide an alternative to it. Some political observers had predicted a polarisation of Indian party system, but there was instead scores of parties making appeals to such primordial factors as caste, religion, race, region, language at the expense of secular values. All parties were driven by pervasive factionalism, and party integration in the era of coalition politics became minimal.

The third phase began in 1971 when the decline of the Congress after the Fourth General Elections (1967) was substantially reversed by its thumping victory in the Lok Sabha Elections of 1971 and State Assembly Elections of 1972. The "grand alliance" of the Swatantra, the Jana Sangh, Congress(O) and the PSP performed very poorly in the parliamentary elections while most of the regional parties such as Bharatiya Kranti Dal in U.P., the Bengal Congress in West Bengal, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Akali Dal in Punjab and the Utkal Congress in Orissa were substantially weakened by the polls. The new feature was the emergence of the politics of populism, opportunism and of naked power. The dominant party ruled through the mechanism of centralised command. Even the tendency to impose leadership on the states seemed to grow and in the process intra-party democracy was weakened. The process of growing centralisation had assumed menacing proportions during the period of internal emergency.

The fourth phase was marked by the assumption of power by the Janata Party by dislodging the Congress from the centre consequent upon the Sixth General Elections of 1977. The Janata combine had risen to power on the crest of anti-emergency wave. The Congress and its allies, the AIADMK and the CPI, won an overwhelming majority of seats in the Southern states. In the State Assembly Elections of May 1977, the Janata and its allies, the CPM and the Akali Dal won in most of the states. The Janata Party emerged as an alternative to the Congress and led to speculations about the prospect of political polarisation in the country. But after one
and half years in office it became a house divided against itself. The clash of personalities, profession of divergent ideologies, demonstrations of strength to get the better of one another and above all mindless involvement in non-issues led to its fall in June 1979.

Janata's character as a ruling party was quite different from that of the Congress. The Janata system appeared to take the place of Congress system and acquired a "one party dominance" character, but soon gave way to a coalition system at the centre, on the model of coalition governments in the states after the Fourth General Elections 1967.

Janata party failed to exercise its hegemony all over the country and failed to make a dent in the South. "The Janata combination was more a contingent formation than result of a genuine political realignment representing a coalition of social interests." Its awfully conglomerate character deprived it of a reasonably unified leadership and outlook. Infighting in the party at the state level had an adverse effect on its national leadership. Though the party emerged as a result of a broad consensus among many parties and leaders, it failed to contain the conflicts which jeopardised the moving and delicate equilibrium of consensus. Conflicts in the Congress were between the leftist and rightist elements, while in the Janata the conflicts were among all the constituents rendering the whole scene chaotic and confusing. Kothari succinctly observes "The decline of Congress system, the emergence and subsequent decline of Indira Gandhi as a political force, and the rise of Janata phenomenon and its failure lead to one conclusion: No centralised system can work in solving basic crisis facing the system, the emergency showed this better than any thing else." 15

13 See, S C Hazary, "Without Indian Party System"? in Political Scientist, Ranchi, Vol xiv - xvi, 1980, p 80
14 Rajni Kothari, Politics and the People, Vol II, New Delhi, Ajanta, 1990, p 329
15 Ibid, p 338
The next phase coincided with the Seventh Lok Sabha Elections of January 1980 which signalled the defeat of the Janata coalition and brought Mrs Gandhi and her Congress(l) back to the centre of the stage. In the elections to the Janata-ruled State Assemblies in May 1980, her party achieved a heady victory. It was in fact a return to one-party dominance of the Congress. The victory of the Telgu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and of the Janata Party in Karnataka created shock waves to the Congress(l). Earlier the party suffered a setback in the Assembly elections held in Haryana, West Bengal, Kerala and Nagaland. These trends were indicative of the decline of the supremacy of the Congress(l) under the leadership of Mrs Gandhi.

The Eighth General Elections of December 1984 held after Mrs Gandhi's assassination, reinforced the one-party dominance of Congress(l) under Rajiv Gandhi's leadership and virtually the national opposition to political disarray and wilderness. There was only one important issue in the elections, namely, the unity and integrity of India, consequent upon the crisis in Punjab and Mrs Gandhi's tragic assassination. The political process during this phase was marked by a "crude combination of technologism for the elite and communalism for the masses." Some parties like the BJP found in communal politics a new lease of life for themselves. Increasingly, Mallas, Sadhus and Jathedars assumed political roles that ought to have been played by party leaders. Almost everywhere the frustrated youth among the minority were being forced to join into the ranks of terrorists and extremists who also instead of steering socially revolutionary struggles were found to become available to the sectarian and secessionist appeals.

The massive mandate in favour of the Congress in the Lok Sabha and in the majority of the states should be qualified by assumption of power by non-congress government in states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tripura, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala and Assam since the Eighth General Elections. The euphoria generated by Rajiv's massive mandate subsided a number of scandals (shady financial deals) against the central government, the failure to solve the
Punjab problem and the government's non-performance on the socio-economic fronts V P Singh's Jan Morcha provided a rallying point for Opposition unity. This produced an electoral understanding between the National Front led by the newly created Janata Dal, BJP and the leftist parties. The Ninth General Elections held during November 1989 was a rejection of Rajiv Gandhi and his Congress, but no clean verdict in favour of any other leader or his party or the five party National Front. The battering of the Congress(I) resulted in a novel experiment of alliance government with critical support of the BJP and the left parties. A major of instability was inherent in the situation as the two supporting parties had crucial roles without the responsibility of running the administration.

National Front government was not only an internal coalition within the National Front, but also and more importantly, an external alliance was made between the National Front, the Left Front and the BJP. The one dominant party system which generally characterised the Indian political scene for nearly three decades came under severe strain. But this phenomenon did not pave the way for the clear emergence of the two-party system. The delicate triangular balance upon which the viability of the BJP rested when it pressed its view points of Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid controversy beyond the tolerance limits of the National Front and the Left Front. Thus the novel experiment of alliance government failed before completion of one year.

The role of the BJP in bringing down the government, during the period was remarkable. The division of the Janata government assiduously engineered by the Congress(I) resulted the installation of a minority government headed by Chandra Sekhar with his Samajwadi Janata Party(SJP) supported by the Congress from outside. This government, before the completion of a four month period, resigned for lack of support by the Congress(I). This brought the nation to choose a new government through the Tenth Lok Sabha Elections held in May-June 1991.
A hung Parliament again was returned as in 1991 but along with allies the Congress(I) emerged as the single largest party with 245 seats and formed the government under P V Narasimha Rao's Prime Ministership. The Congress(I) did very well in Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Haryana and Assam while receiving a setback in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Its poor showing in these two states prevented the party from securing a stable majority at the centre. While the left parties had maintained their position, the Janata Dal under V P Singh had suffered decline with around 55 seats and the Samajwadi Janata Party (SJP) under Chandra Sekhar was of no significance with only five seats. The BJP emerged with flying colours as the second largest party with 119 seats. It provided a stable and effective opposition to the party in power at the Centre. The Congress (I) perceived a likely Opposition in coming years from the National Front, the Left Front and the BJP.

However, what bedevils the Opposition's efforts for unity is the want of a credible long-term strategy with clear-cut policies and programmes. A patchwork of parties fighting their common political foe and one another cannot hope to make considerable headway. With the "first past the post" electoral system the distribution of 'opposition' votes among several parties naturally gave Congress a clear advantage in getting seats.

The last phase coincided with the Eleventh and Twelfth Lok Sabha Elections held in 1996 and 1998 respectively which resulted in the repetition of the hung parliament. The electoral battle in 1996 occurred mostly among three politico-electoral formations: one is the Congress(I) and its Tamil Nadu ally, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) along with certain minor allies in a few states, like Kerala. The second was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its Maharashtrian ally Shiv Sena (S S) along with the emerged Samata Party and the Haryana Vikas Party (HVP). The third force was the United Front16 a combination of National Front, Left Front, Samajwadi...

16 The United Front consists of 13 parties
Party (S P) and few other regional party like Tamil Maanila Congress(TMC) etc. The mid-term poll of 1996 also witnessed the battle among the same three political combinations like 'Congress and its allies', 'BJP and its allies' and 'United Front'. This time the alliance partners of the Congress were RJD, RPI, Muslim League, KCM and RJP. The BJP fought the election in alliance with Shiv Sena, Samata Party, HVP, Akali Dal, AIADMK, BJD, Trinamool Congress, Lok Shakti, PMK, MDMK, RCP and Janata Party. The United Front also went to the poll with its partners like JD, CPI (M), CPI, DMK, TMC, Samajwadi Party, TDP, FB, RSP, AIICS (S).

Unlike 70's and 80's, the Eleventh and Twelfth Lok Sabha Elections witnessed the eclipse of the so called National constituency syndrome. The entire nation did not project itself a single constituency in the absence of a nation wide electoral wave. The electorate did not give the ballot whip in favour of a particular party. The BJP emerged as a single largest party by securing 16 seats in 1996 and 180 in 1998. The Congress(l) remained in the second position, suffering its worst ever defeat. Though the BJP formed the government with Vajpayee as the Prime Minister in 1996, yet it could enjoy a lowest ever 13 days term due to the polarisation of the so called secular forces like the Congress and the United Front. Subsequently, the United Front government was formed with H D Deve Gowda, a state level leader as the Prime Minister, with the outside support of Congress.

The Twelfth Lok Sabha Elections, with the return of hung Parliament for the fourth successive time, confirmed the end of the era of national electoral verdicts. The BJP continued to emerge as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha, securing 180 seats. This election also witnessed the spectacular rise of the BJP combine as the largest political formation in the Lok Sabha. The Congress and the United Front failed to manipulate the number in their obsession to keep BJP out of power. After much politico-arithmetic calculations the President of India appointed a BJP lead coalition government with Vajpayee as the Prime Minister. This time veteran Vajpayee emerged
triumphant by winning the vote of confidence on the floor of the Lok Sabha with a strategic support by C B Naidu's TDP which had already left the United Front due to its post-election political compulsions.

Another significant outcome of these elections is the sharing of substantial chunk of votes by regional parties from different regions of the country. This indicates the tiredness of the voters regarding the policies of the central government that discriminate against the state government and the regional aspirations. The federalization of politics became noteworthy during these two elections. Further, the 1990s mark the decade of political alignments and realignments. The contemporary politico-electoral developments reveal that the way to power in a pluralist society like India lies in the creation of political, regional and social alliances.

The vastness and diversity of the country and the enormity and variegated nature of the problems confronting the country will make it unlikely for the emergence of two well-organized parties even in foreseeable future. There is no early prospect of durable and effective opposition unity at the national level. The BJP's immoderate stand on certain issues affecting national unity and secular fabric of our polity is not likely to bring it closer to both centrist and left parties. "The process of bipolarisation will remain a far off thing so long as factionalism, rivalry are chronic in the major political parties, bases of political action lie in such irrational factors like caste, community, region, language, creed, personality and charisma, the fight for power is not imbued with some altruistic motive and does not reflect the social and economic urges of the masses." The realignment of political parties remains an uncertain factor in Indian politics. "There is a school that maintains that given the social and economic structure of Indian society and ideological ambivalence, the politics of manipulation and coalition are inevitable." 

17 S C Hazary, "Wither Indian Party system?", *Op Cit*, p 82
India is not yet ripe for the two-party system of the British pattern based on ideological polarisation, nor an ideologically loose system of two parties of the American model based on a broad national consensus, nor a three-party system in which three parties or coalitions occupy the 'Left', 'Centre' and the 'Right' of the ideological spectrum. One-party dominance of the Congress has been modified by electoral verdicts including the recent one. It would not be wide of the mark to argue that in a vast and variegated country like India, the era of single party governments is over and coalition government would be installed at New Delhi and in some of the state capitals on the basis of broad consensus worked out by like-minded political parties in coming years.

**SUMMARY**

The development of the Indian party system lies in the freedom movement days. Though the Indian party system does not come under any theoretical typologies, its nature has been dynamic. It started with the 'one party dominance' in Nehru era and continued to be the same up to 1980s. In 1990s the Indian party system acquired a pluralistic dimension with the end of 'one party dominance' and also the emergence of a hung Parliament. On the whole, the Indian party system has undergone nine different phases (already mentioned in the present chapter). The contemporary politico-electoral history in India reveals the end of 'national verdict' and intensification of political 'alignments' and 'realignments' leading to the formation of coalition governments in the hung Parliament. The just concluded elections mark the emergence of BJP as the single largest party and its combine as the largest groups in Lok Sabha. Thus the closing part of 20th century witnessed the rise of BJP as a powerful political force in India and also the formation of BJP led coalition government.