

State and society in india essay sample



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India is known for being by far the largest democracy in the world, with almost 600 million voters. India's democratic political system is a legacy of British colonialism (for instance their parliamentary government, or the First Past the Post electoral system), which ended in 1947. The British introduced self-government to India in stages, but it was not until the end of colonial rule and the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 by a Constituent Assembly that universal suffrage was achieved.

Despite this democratic basis, India's political life is also said to have been dominated for more than 50 years by nearly one party, the Congress, a party which was founded in December 1885, and was the first effective all-India political organisation. A question thus arises, about India having an effective multi-party democracy (a system of government by the whole population, with more than three political parties) .

We will see in a first part that the Congress party has played a major role in Indian politics, and still does today, however, in a second part, we will analyse the elements which transformed this one-party system to an increasingly fragmented and unstable multi-party system. But let us begin with the examination of the predominant role of the Congress in India party-system.

One of the factors that enabled such a dominant position is the use of the First Past the Post system of voting, in which victory goes to the candidate who gets the most votes. This system can result in a vast representational gap between an electorally strong but highly fragmented opposition of parties and the ability of a large, nationally organised party or coalition of

parties to gain a sizeable legislative majority with only a plurality of the votes.

This system of voting was chosen mainly to avoid fragmented legislatures and to help the formation of stable governments (stability being a major consideration in a developing country with widespread poverty and illiteracy). The First Past the Post electoral system resulted in the ruling Congress party securing stable majorities in the Lok Sabha (the lower house), usually against a fragmented opposition, at least until 1977. Moreover, the Congress party could occupy a prominent position in the political arena, as it was able gather the opposition within itself.

According to Khotari, between 1947 and 1967, India's party system was characterised by “ dominance coexisting with competition but without a trace of alternation”, that is to say that opposition had little hope of preventing the Congress from obtaining sizeable majorities in the legislature, as a consequence, they had to content themselves with being only parties of pressure: instead of providing a real alternative to the Congress party, they functioned by influencing sections within the Congress.

It was thus within the Congress and not between Congress and the opposition parties that the major conflicts in Indian politics occurred, and within Congress that nearly all the groups that mattered in Indian politics could be found. We could also add that as the Congress occupied most of the left and right, the opposition parties were at the margins of Congress and at the margins of the political and party-system and they often found

themselves on opposite sides of the Congress, which killed any hope of their making common cause against it.

It is thus justified to assert that it was a “ dominant party-system” (Morris-Jones) at the time, far from an ideal multi-party democracy. Furthermore, during the ruling of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a confrontational posture towards opposition parties was adopted at the national level and towards opposition-controlled governments in various states, which challenges once again the notion of multipartyism in post-independence India. As a matter of fact, opposition parties were not given many opportunities for interaction by the new Congress.

She also took a more aggressive line with her own party, and this soon produces what Kochnek has called “ a new political process” as the Prime Minister created “ a pyramidal decision-making structure in the party and government”, which consisted of centralising decision making, weakening institutions and creating an overly personalised regime. This new political process proved unable to manage the tensions and cleavages of a heterogeneous party operating in a heterogeneous society, federally governed.

As a consequence, this created openings for the opposition, and, by 1974, under Jayaprakash Narayan’s leadership, an opposition movement had acquired real substance and momentum. Mrs Gandhi’s reaction was severe. The opposition’s response was similarly forceful. Mrs Gandhi, who found herself under growing pressure from within her own party, turned increasingly to a small circle of confidants in which her son Sanjay figured

most importantly. He began to treat the opposition to the threats, smears, and organised violence that remained his trademark until his death in mid-1980.

There followed the Emergency period, during which relations between Congress and the opposition reached their nadir. Not only were opposition activists faced with imprisonment, but power within Congress was further centralised. In addition to this, it cannot be denied that the Congress still plays a major role in India party-system, even if its famed one party dominance was over by the mid 1980s. However, the sympathy factor associated with the assassinations of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 and 1991 respectively helped Congress to win difficult elections in both of those years.

Even after the 1991 general election Congress was simply the largest party. No single party has won a majority in general election since 1984.

Concerning coalitions parties, they usually collapse soon after having been elected because of internal factionalism: for instance in 1989 the Janata-Dal / National Front minority government collapsed less than one year after, and in 1996 the United Front stayed in office for a mere 13 days.

Furthermore, even if the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been a prime beneficiary of Congress decline, it undoubtedly lacks strength outside its strongholds in the North (the Hindi Belt) and the Western states of India. In 1998, the outcome of the election had enabled the party to form a coalition government, however, it did not manage to remain stable with one regional party the AIADMK from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, proving to be a

particularly difficult partner, who eventually withdrew support in April, and consequently precipitated early elections.

It is thus justified, in a way, for the Congress Party to claim to be the only party capable of providing stable national governments without the burden of unreliable coalition partners. We have seen that the Congress party has enjoyed for fifty years a special predominant position in Indian party-system, nevertheless, the increasing fragmenting tendency of the party system which occurs nowadays cannot be ignored. First of all, we can begin this second part by asserting that opposition parties always had the possibility to express themselves, even between 1947 and 1967, during the so-called hegemonic rule of the Congress.

As a matter of fact, competition between parties did occur, but opposition parties acted more like pressure groups within a party of consensus, than like real independent opposition parties. However, it should thus be acknowledged that India party-system was representative, even if the plurality of opinions was expressed in one only dominant party. Secondly, over the past 50 years, a market polity emerged in India. When it comes to the 1967-1977 period, according to Khotari, the socio-economic and demographic profile of the polity was changing rather fast.

The mobilisation of new recruits and groups into the political process had given rise to the development of new and more differentiated identities and patterns of political cleavage. This gave rise to the expectation of freer political access and a greater insistence on government performance.

Intermediaries and vote banks (means by which workers were told to vote

for a candidate by the land-owners), while of continuing importance, had become increasingly circumvented as citizens looked for more effective participation in the political market place and develop an ability to evaluate and make choices.

As a result, the “ dominant party model has started to give way to a more differentiated structure of party competition”. Indeed, the 1967 election saw the Congress lose power in six states, since the competition had grown too severe to be contained by the party’s internal bargaining: dissident Congressmen were highly responsible for the weakening of the party. This brought a number of opposition parties fully into the market place, and competition that had previously occurred within the Congress was now brought into the realm of inter-party conflict.

This evolution resumed after the Emergency (which lasted from 1975 to 1977), an authoritarian interlude during which fundamental constitutional rights were set aside by Mrs. Gandhi, and which even made her lose the 1977 elections, showing the unwillingness of India’s voters to accept undemocratic practices. In fact, an awakening occurred among the great mass of workers, as people at all level of society became increasingly aware of the logic of electoral politics. Voters thus became more assertive and competitive, and their appetites for resources from politicians grew.

Interest groups crystallised and came increasingly into conflict, so that it became harder to operate a political machine which could cater to every organised interest, as the Congress had very nearly done in the Nehru years. This period was mainly marked by freer competition between political parties

but also by greater instability in the party system and within many parties. Thirdly, a growing divergence between the logic of politics at the national level and the political logic in various state-level arenas can increasingly be noticed.

The most obvious sign of this, is the emergence in the early 1980s of regional parties in several states. As a matter of fact, the most important factors which contributed to the development of Indian multipartyism are the pluralism and cultural diversity of the country, the contrasting styles of party leadership, clashing ideological perspective, and more recently the politics of Mandir (religion), Mandal (caste), and markets (liberalisation and globalisation).

As a consequence, nowadays, effective electoral alliances are the key to winning national power in India as no party has a comprehensive national presence anymore. The Indian party-system is not a national one anymore; instead, it is composed of a patchwork of state-based party systems. As a consequence, national parties have to adapt their electoral strategies to this new structure, and issues of national importance have to be set alongside local political considerations.

In a nutshell, we have seen that over the past 50 years, the Congress party has enjoyed a dominant position in Indian politics, and has often been characterised as a one-party dominant system, since the Congress largely benefited from the First Past the Post system of voting, as it managed for a long period of time to gather nearly all opposition parties within itself, or during the Emergency strongly threatened dissidents with imprisonment, but

even today is the only single party to have won a majority in a general election.

However, opposition parties could practically always be heard (even if it was within the Congress party), and a real market polity is increasingly emerging in India, mostly because of the cultural diversity of the country. India is thus becoming more democratic, and is learning step by step to build its own political culture. Such a process is far from being easy after having being ruled for so long by the English.