‘The fragmentation of political parties and the quality of Indian democracy’


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‘Short of a threat to the integrity of the national political system, the major threat comes from the possibility of the disintegration of the governing party. That the stability of the central government seems to depend so heavily on a single leader dominating a weak party is a cause for concern.’
(Weiner, 1989, p.37)

The fate of India’s democratic political system and the strength of Indian political parties have often been linked. As many of these parties are regarded to be in decline it seems an opportune moment to re-assess the contribution of the parties to sustaining democracy in India and to examine the consequences of party fragmentation on the democratic infrastructure of the political system. The development and maintenance of democracy has frequently been traced to the role of the nationalist movement and its successor the Congress Party. However to focus on the Congress Party exclusively runs the risk of underestimating the contribution of other parties in maintaining the conventions and procedures necessary for the functioning of democracy in India. Undue emphasis on the Congress Party would understate the ability of non-Congress coalitions to win general elections and form governments in recent years. Having entered these caveats I will deal with the Congress Party first as its foundational role cannot be ignored and the manner and causes of it decline reflect factors that continue to be relevant to the health of representative democracy in India. Before that I will reflect on the place of political parties in giving form to democracy.

Democracy and political parties

Some conceptual clarification is required about what I take to mean by the term ‘democracy’ in the Indian context. I use the term to refer to liberal representative democracy except in the few instance that I make a distinction. Among the conditions that
have to be fulfilled for Indian democracy to qualify for this label are a fairly and directly elected assembly to direct the activity of the state. Also critical are the protection of political freedom and civil liberties that enable individual participation in a democratic system (Beetham, 1993, pp.56-7). I am aware that some writers, most notably Ayesha Jalal, have expressed reservations about using the term ‘democracy’ as a shorthand for the liberal representative variant. She prefers to use the term ‘formal’ democracy for that purpose. Jalal uses ‘democracy’ to refer to what she describes as substantive democracy; a form that enables people to pursue ‘their interests with a measure of autonomy from entrenched structures of domination and privilege’ (1995, p.3).

While I take the normative view that democratic development is incomplete and the autonomy of citizens needs expanding in India (and elsewhere) I also follow Rueschemeyer et al (1992, p.43) and take the view that liberal representative democracy brings with it important advantages that make it a worthwhile project in spite of its failure to eliminate socio-economic inequality. There is also the possibility, with Jalal’s approach, that India’s considerable achievement of maintaining a representative democracy, though marred by the lapse into overt authoritarianism during the Emergency period 1975-77, is diminished. A brief comparison with the experiences of other post-colonial political systems puts India’s achievement in perspective. This cannot disguise serious shortcomings with regard to the quality of representative democracy, the accountability of the institutions of the state to elected representatives or the protection of civil liberties in India. It could further be argued that in addition to the shortcomings in the preservation of liberal democratic rights these rights have been interpreted in an uneven fashion with regard to gender. The arrangements intended to guarantee groups rights in the area of personal law has resulted in a legal system that fails to uphold equality for women across a range of issues (Menon, 1998, pp.243-4). This is not to suggest that liberal representative democracy is an inappropriate project but to note the need for its re-articulation in a more thoughtful manner (Phillips, 1993).

The role of political parties in strengthening democratic political systems has been much debated in the classic literature on the subject. The early elite theorists, such as Michels, saw parties as inherently elitist and likely to frustrate the control of government by the
mass of ordinary people. This view was paralleled by the aspirations of the Populist and the Progressives in the United States who deliberately tried to limit the role of parties with reforms to encourage direct democracy and limit the power of party bosses (Lipow, 1996, pp.46-7). Others have taken a less pessimistic view of parties and noted that they structure democratic politics. Schattschneider reflected this high view of parties when asked the rhetorical question ‘How else can the majority get organized?’ (1942, p.208). They are considered to do this by aggregating and articulating mass preferences as they compete to win elections. In addition to this parties reconcile conflicts as they endeavour to win support from a wide selection of groups (Pomper, 1972, pp.47-53). Following an election victory parties become the vital link between the people and government and thus facilitate popular sovereignty. The literature on parties and democracy in India tends to endorse this positive view of parties and in an ironic counterpoint to Michels the nationalist elite are credited with responsibility for setting democratic norms and disseminating them among the wider population (Sisson, 1994, p.37).

The Indian National Congress and Democracy

A number of scholars have argued that the Indian National Congress provided a critical (Das Gupta, 1989; Manor, 1990; Weiner, 1989) institutional basis for the development and sustenance of democracy in India. The protracted process of constitutional reform under British rule, designed to give limited representation to Indians, leading up to Independence in 1947 is often given credit for successful democratization in India. However Varshney argues that a more accurate explanation lies in the complex relationship between the democratically inclined nationalist movement and a retrenching colonial regime (1998, pp.38-41). This view accords the nationalist movement much greater responsibility for democratizing the political structures that were bequeathed to the people of independent India by the departing colonial power. The democratic path adopted by the nationalist elite was consistent with its liberal orientation. Sisson notes the ‘powerful liberal persuasion of a nationalist political class that achieved and maintained dominance in the nationalist movement’ (1994, p.37). This included a commitment to the liberal political rights and freedoms vital to the success of democracy. Gandhi’s leadership helped unify the nationalist movement and keep it on a moderate path. While he was less enamoured of
Western political ideas than some he certainly prevented extremists from dominating the movement and kept the path clear for the liberal elite that was to lead the Congress Party after 1947.

The pre-Independence experience of the nationalist movement also shaped an organisation that could be transformed rapidly into political party. Its early success as a political party was congruent with the demonstrated ability of the nationalist movement to mobilise disparate groups into a unified coalition. The devolved nature of the Congress organisation required for the successful articulation of a national movement in a regionally diverse country meant that the Congress was well prepared for the transition to a federal system and the associated state level party systems (Manor, 1990, p.28). The prominence of the INC and its leaders in the nationalist struggle gave the Congress Party a powerful aura of legitimacy (Kothari, 1964, p.1166). The legacy was not entirely benign as the cumbersome coalition assembled before 1947 proved inimical to social reform and difficult to sustain in the longer term.

The Congress Party under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru was profoundly influential on the institutions and norms of the new Indian state (Khilnani, 1993, pp.198-201). The Congress Party and more especially the leadership elite orchestrated the drafting of the new Constitution from the ‘representative’ elections to the conclusion of the Constituent Assembly debates (G.Austin, 1966). This process embedded the values of the nationalist elite, democracy, secularism, economic development, social and economic reform, into the rhetorical structure of the Indian state even if the policy consequences of this commitment were uneven. The foundational role of the Congress Party has encouraged some observers to describe the Indian state as ‘a party-based state’ (Das Gupta, 1989, p.71). The Congress Party added more than the legal basis to Indian democracy. It also did much to propagate the conventions and values that determined the pattern of democratic behaviour required by the new constitution. It was unsurprising that the Congress Party emerged as the dominant party and won comfortable parliamentary majorities in the face of a diverse array of opposition parties until 1977. This dominance was somewhat exaggerated by the single member single plurality electoral system under which the Congress Party never won a majority of the vote. The methods used to achieve these results were modified as the first
generation leadership of the Congress Party was displaced following the death of Nehru in 1964.

The electoral strength of Congress in the early years of the new republic has been ascribed to the institutional strength of the party. Kothari famously described the Congress ‘system’ that allowed district leaders to distribute patronage and incorporate social groups at the local level. This was built up in pyramidal fashion with links to the state and national party. The organisation provided space for factions within the party to compete for influence and so ‘an intricate structure of conflict, mediation, bargaining and consensus was developed with the framework of Congress’ (Kothari, 1964, pp.1163-4). In the terminology outlined in the preceding section it could be said that the Congress Party, by aggregating and articulating mass preferences, was the vital link between the people and government that facilitated popular sovereignty. The party also carried out the critical function of conflict mediation within its organisation. Objections could be posed to the effectiveness of popular sovereignty as the interests of the wealthier members were not ignored and the Nehruvian social revolution, intended to emancipate the large indigent minority who disproportionately backed the Congress Party at successive elections, did not occur (Jalal, 1995, p.45).

The ruling style of Indira Gandhi has been identified as a critical factor in determining the move away from the early Congress ‘system’. The outcome of a contest for absolute control of the party between senior party leaders and Indira Gandhi was a split in 1969 into the Congress(R) faction under the leadership of Mrs Gandhi and the Congress(O) faction. The latter maintained control over the formal party structure and the former dominated the parliamentary party. By 1972 the Congress(R) had achieved supremacy with a series of significant election victories (all references to the Congress Party hereafter refer to the faction led by Mrs Gandhi). Mrs Gandhi increasingly relied upon direct appeals to the voters and did not rebuild the old ‘system’. Attempts were made to rebuild the organisation but central dominance robbed it of its old vitality (M. Singh, 1990, pp.60-1). Das Gupta observed that Mrs Gandhi ‘increasingly transformed the nature of the organisation from an institutional mode of accommodation to an electoral instrument beholden to a ruling leadership’ (1989, p.70). Kohli provides an account of the hollowing
out of the Congress Party at local level in Gujarat that resulted in virtually defunct organisation by the mid-1980s (1991, pp.42-7). He observed that the Congress ‘party’ remained as a symbol used by candidates to further their electoral ambitions. These candidates had some links to the local population and reflected a coalition of dominant groups among the electorate. The old dominant castes had been successfully challenged by upwardly mobile castes. However candidates’ nominations remained the gift of the central leadership and the local party had ceased to aggregate and conciliate the concerns of disparate groups. Congress continued to win elections but its institutional weakness meant that its eventual decline was never in doubt.

This illustration raises the interesting relationship between elite agency, mass participation, social change and the role of political parties. So far the discussion has emphasised the role of the party elite in securing democracy and then weakening the party as an institution. The question needs to be raised as to whether changes in the parties are entirely elite determined or can be traced to wider structural factors. There is also the interesting issue of the role of the electorate in interpreting and adhering to democratic values. Since 1947 the trend has been one of increasing participation in elections and demonstrable sophistication on the part of ordinary voters. Attitudes towards parties have become markedly less positive since the 1960s though voters continue to expect the government to have an important function in society (Sisson, 1994, pp.45-6). One sign of a strong willed electorate is the retribution visited upon governments that fail to govern effectively. This trend is particularly clear at the state level (Manor, 1995, p.68). The nationalist elite may have set India on a democratic trajectory but ordinary voters have taken to democracy and set about using it for their own purposes.

The growing assertiveness of a variety of social groups at the very least challenged the ability of the Congress Party to conciliate a broad cross section of social groups. Bardhan links the ‘demand overload that has short-circuited the Congress system’ to the popular perception that democracy should open up opportunities for as many people as possible (1998, p.192). Upwardly mobile groups that were not accommodated by the Congress system took a while to organise themselves effectively but once they had reached a certain point on the political learning curve they proved to be formidable opponents even
if they were not always able to displace the dominant party. For example in Uttar Pradesh (UP) the increasingly prosperous middle castes, excluded from patronage and political office by the upper caste ruling elite, began to challenge the Congress hegemony from the mid-1960s onwards (Hasan, 1989, pp.175-8). The Schedule Castes took longer to assert themselves in UP but when they did in the late 1980s they severely weakened the Congress Party. The dislocation caused by social change continues to have an impact on the relationship between political parties and democracy that will be discussed later in the paper. For the moment it is sufficient to say that Congress had lost its monopoly position as the mediator between the ordinary people and the national government by the mid-1970s. Other parties were making reasonable claims to a piece of the action.

The institutional decline of the Congress Party diminished the ability of the political system to manage disputes in a democratic manner and thus contributed to the intensification of civil conflict in India. Weiner argues that the failure of state Congress parties in Assam and Punjab to negotiate settlements to local disputes was prelude to a deterioration in political stability (1989, p.33). In other words the Congress leadership found it difficult to govern effectively without a strong party. The organisational paralysis of the Congress Party also contributed to the fragmentation of the party and the rise of opposition parties. The brief ‘success’ of the Congress Party, such as described above in the case of Gujarat, in winning elections on the basis of unmediated appeals to the electorate encouraged others to follow a similar approach. The move away from conciliating and mediating politics also opened up the way for other forms of political mobilisation. The use of caste and religion became much more apparent in this changed environment. It is ironic that the Congress Party in the 1980s, disoriented in the absence of a strong federalised party organisation, played the majoritarian card and thus legitimised a strategy that the Bharatiya Janata Party could use with much greater credibility(Manor, 1988, pp.80-1; Hasan, 1998, pp.196-205). The patronage basis of the Congress ‘system’ was a powerful incentive to encourage potential dissidents to remain loyal and also a means of encouraging new entrants to the political market to join Congress. The more open political competition created by a weakened Congress made opposition parties at the national level a more credible alternative for political entrepreneurs and voters alike.
The Fragmentation of Indian Political Parties

The Congress Party was defeated in 1977 by a unified opposition that combined to form the Janata Party. The Janata Party included the Hindu nationalist Jan Sangh, elements of the Congress (O) and the Bharatiya Lok Dal. The latter party had strong connections with the middle castes of UP who had chafed at the Congress dominance in the state. Janata also attracted a number of Congress leaders who defected just prior to the election (Jaffrelot, 1996, p.282). The Janata Party proved to be more successful at winning elections than governing as pre-existing tensions between the members of former parties surfaced and cabinet divisions became irreconcilable. However the principle of anti-Congressism had been established as electorally viable and some of the constituent parts of the Janata Party were able to re-establish themselves. The weakening Congress Party was given an appearance of rude political health by a landslide result in the 1984 general elections but the sympathy vote in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s assassination disguised its organisational fragility (Hewitt, 1989, p.161). The BJP, formed in 1980, inherited the nationalist mantle of the dissolved Jan Sangh but remained in the political wilderness until the late 1980s. The Lok Dal element of the Janata Party retained a following among the middle peasantry of Bihar and UP. In October 1988 the political legatees of the Lok Dal joined with leaders of the former socialist parties and a new group of Congress defectors led by V.P.Singh to form the Janata Dal (JD) (Fickett, 1993, p.1151). While the JD had pretensions to national status it realised its limitations and entered a limited electoral alliance with the BJP to fight the 1989 general election.

The Congress Party, after a poor spell in government, was defeated. In contrast to 1977 no party emerged with an overall majority and the JD minority government was unable to complete a full five year term. It also followed the Janata pattern and split in spectacular fashion while still in office. It was at this point that the fragmentation of political parties accelerated. The Congress Party emerged as the largest party after the 1991 election, but still short of a parliamentary majority it had clearly not recovered the dominant position it enjoyed before 1989. The BJP emerged as the largest opposition party but its support was regionally limited and it could not make a convincing claim to be a national party.
### Party fragmentation in the Lok Sabha 1993-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of seats controlled by the two largest parties</th>
<th>Number of parties that controlled 90% of the seats</th>
<th>Number of parties</th>
<th>Number of Independent MPs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
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Author’s calculations based on the following sources:
1993 - (Government of India, 1993 p.v)

Regional parties began to challenge Congress successfully at the state level from the 1960s onwards. This resulted in a greater number of non-Congress governments at the state level but did not make a significant difference to majorities at national level. The national consequences of this were seen indirectly as Mrs Gandhi interfered at the state level to maintain Congress supremacy. It is only in the 1990s that the full significance of the regional parties for national politics became apparent. The current influence of regional parties at the national level was previewed by the occasional support extended by the AIADMK to the minority Congress administration between 1991 and 1994. The inability of a national party to win a clear majority meant that regional parties became important partners in coalitions and electoral alliances. The strength of the regional parties also explained why national parties could not win majorities in the Lok Sabha (J.Chiriyankandath, 1996).

The 1996 general election result was inconclusive but it established the trend away from national party dominance. The Congress Party looked set to lose on a wave of anti-incumbency sentiment but it was further undermined by splits and a lack of party discipline. In Tamil Nadu the state party rebelled when the national leadership ignored local judgement and entered into an electoral pact with the AIADMK. The Congress Party in the state broke away and formed the Tamil Maanila Congress that swept the elections in
alliance with another regional party the DMK. In Maharashtra the presence of rebel candidates, disappointed at being denied nominations, helped the BJP, in alliance with regional Shiv Sena Party, to sweep the state. In Madhya Pradesh and UP leaders who had split from the Congress Party and formed their own parties undermined the already weak parent party. The BJP was not completely immune from this trend as the dissident leader Vaghela formed the Rashtriya Janata Party and ran candidates against his former party in the state of Gujarat.

Following the 1996 election the BJP, as the largest party, made an unsuccessful attempt to form a coalition government. The United Front coalition of regional and left of centre parties proved able to form a minority government in June 1996 but were dependent on ‘outside support’ from the Congress Party. By December 1997 Congress had withdrawn support from the UF government and fresh elections were called. The process of party fragmentation continued while the government was in office with the JD splitting. The RJD emerged as the party backing the Chief Minister in the state. The impending elections were a catalyst to further party splits. The Lok Shakti Party in Karnataka and the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa split from the JD and formed electoral alliances with the BJP. In West Bengal a breakaway section of the Congress Party led by Mamata Banerjee formed the Trinamul Congress which also aligned with the BJP. A number of senior Congress figures also decided to run as independents. Only Sonia Gandhi’s decision to campaign on behalf of the Congress Party appears to have saved the Congress Party from further disintegration.

**The Consequences of Party Fragmentation for Democracy in India**

The fragmentation of parties has resulted in volatile electoral outcomes and has diminished the power of national political parties to determine the agenda. This may be seen as a useful corrective given the weakened institutional structure of the Congress Party. As the party ceased to aggregate and conciliate interests at the local level and reverted to plebiscitary and populist politics any claims to be an effective mediator have to be considered with considerable scepticism. However there is little evidence that the parties that have gained influence at the expense of Congress are any more institutionalised than the Congress. Many of the regional parties and the newer splinter parties are even weaker
in terms of organisation than the Congress Party. Some of the splinter ‘parties’ can only make weak claims to function as parties in the sense described above and are organised with the intention of securing influence for the notable who launched the party. The ‘influence’ may be as little as securing a parliamentary seat for the party leader. Thus the veteran Congress Leader, Jagannath Mishra, floated his own party, the Bihar Jan Congress, to contest the 1998 election (Asian Age, 24/12/97, p.2).

The dominance of the leaders of some of the newer parties suggests few institutional constraints on their actions. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), provides a useful example. In an interview I conducted with some BSP party officials it became clear that the writ of the leader was absolute (Interview with Mr Varun, President of the Delhi unit of the BSP, and other state party officials, 25/1/97). They could not tell me if the party was going to field candidates in the upcoming municipal elections as they were waiting for instructions from the national party leader, Kanshi Ram. Furthermore they expressed no wish to have the decision made at the local level. The dominance of the BSP leaders has also been commented on in the party in UP (O.Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, 1998, pp. 229-233). Other leaders, such as Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party, are also keen to give the impression that they have strong control over their parties. Other evidence of weak institutionalisation lies in the inability of some parties to mobilise volunteers and raise money to fund election campaigns. Again the Congress Party illustrates this malaise (Asian Age, 27/12/97, p.2). There are two notable exceptions to the general trend towards weak institutionalisation. The parties of the left have stronger institutional structures and norms. The BJP also gains considerable strength from its institutional depth.

One consequence of the demise of Congress as a national party has been the emergence of the BJP as a contender for the position of the national party. The rise of the BJP has many causes but among them has been the political space created by Congress decline (Basu, 1996, p.67-8). It needs to be emphasised that the BJP has yet to emerge as a full national party. In the 1998 election the party fielded only 383 candidates - a figure that falls well short of the 543 candidates a national party could field. The Congress Party, still nursing national ambitions, came closer to full coverage by fielding a total 471 candidates (http://www.indiavotes.com/parties/parties_summary.shtml). Furthermore there are whole
states where the BJP gains negligible electoral support. It remains to be seen whether India’s electoral geography is a structural constraint on the BJP or if it is simply a case of the slow accumulation of momentum that will eventually see the party achieve effective all-India strength (Manor, 1992). The BJP is an exception to the trend towards weak party institutions in India because it has a strong network of activists and possesses stronger party discipline. However this has to be qualified by identifying the source of the BJP’s organisational strength. The close links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) provide the party with activists, funds and an ethos that encourages discipline. The BJP was formed at the behest of the RSS and it remains close links to it. While the party includes many who are not members of the RSS the influence of the parent organisation is profound. For example, most of the BJP members of the current union cabinet are RSS members.

The association of the BJP with the RSS brings into question the ability of the party to perform the mediating function between government and voters that has been described above. The RSS aims to transform Indian society into one that reflects its religious nationalist ethos (Akbar, 1999, p.8). The BJP is an element in a wider project and though it has to be responsive to the voters, a frequent source of tension inside the party and between the party and the RSS, it has other responsibilities. The nationalist agenda of the BJP/RSS is damaging to democracy in other ways. The liberal values that are the basis on which liberal representative democracy must be built only command selective support from the BJP. The mobilisation of political support around communal issues has been at best damaging to the status of minorities and at worst endangered civil peace. An example of this was the pattern of local violence that was associated with the rise of the BJP in certain areas of UP (Hasan, 1998, pp.212-213). Similarly the ambivalent response on the part of the BJP to attacks on Christians since the 1998 election demonstrated a weak commitment to some of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Other political parties also demonstrate a casual attachment to liberal patterns of behaviour, and have made instrumental use of violence, but such a position on the part of a party with aspirations to national leadership is a worrying development for the future of Indian democracy.
In some respects what the parties lose the voters gain. The increasing frequency of elections gives citizens more power over parties. Voters have opportunities to express their preferences more often. The expectation of an early election also makes parties reluctant to pursue policies that lack widespread support. Having said this voters lose out in other ways. The ability of parties to assemble a platform, gather majority support (especially at the national level), and govern is severely compromised by the current process of fragmentation. In other words the mechanism of popular sovereignty is not functioning effectively. The extent to which the people, in any representative democracy, have control over the detail of government policy is questionable. However under normal conditions we would expect some broad equivalence between government actions and public opinion with the caveat that significant deviation on the part of the government would lead to its defeat at the next election. Platforms have only been partially implemented since the onset of national government by coalition in 1996. One reason for this is that coalition governments have so far proved unstable and are unlikely to come close to completing their full term under current conditions. Secondly, the compromises required by the exigencies of coalition government result in ad hoc outcomes. This is not to argue that coherent policy is unachievable under the conditions of coalition government. However the circumstances under which coalition governments are currently formed in India are not conducive to stability or coherent policy implementation.

A certain amount of the current problem of coalition government instability must be ascribed to the ongoing process of party fragmentation and electoral re-alignment. Thus we see members of the BJP led coalition who are only prepared to give limited support to cabinet decisions. Mamata Banerjee and the Trinamul Congress provide erratic support apparently hoping to dilute the negative electoral consequences of associating with the BJP. Membership of the coalition has brought a package of benefits to Banerjee’s home state of West Bengal but the association with the coalition is less about participating in government and more about the outcome of the next election(Asian Age, 11/2/99). Thus while electoral futures remain uncertain and parties fight for political survival the process of coalition government will be fraught(Wyatt, 1999). It may be that the proliferation of parties will be a temporary phenomenon as new parties fall by the wayside. It seems unlikely that any one party will be able to win a majority in the Lok Sabha in the medium
term but if the two main parties gain a larger proportion of seats government by coalitions with fewer parties may provide the context in which coalitional behaviour at the national level can habituate in India. There are precedents for successful coalitions at the state level but India’s electoral diversity at the national level sets more demanding conditions for successful coalition government (J. Chiriyankandath, 1997).

The preceding paragraph should not be read as an implicit argument in favour of single party government though there are some advantages to having a national government that can complete its full term and we are still waiting for a national coalition government in India to achieve this distinction. Coalition governments can be criticised for lacking the single party’s ability to aggregate interests and articulate a version of these interests, based on conciliated and compromise between different groups of supporters, as a national platform. This objection has a number of weaknesses. Firstly, a deinstitutionalised Congress Party did not have the resources to aggregate or conciliate interests from the late 1960s onwards. The Indian political system has not had a majority party capable of providing these democratic functions at the national level for several decades. Secondly it is a mistake to assume that parties in a coalition cannot aggregate and conciliate interests. The Congress ‘system’ could be described as an endogenous process of coalition formation. It is one that was difficult to observe in action because the coalition was serviced inside the institutions of the party. This lack of transparency may have given the outcome a deceptive air of coherence. The conduct of coalition politics is less discreet in the 1990s because compromises are negotiated between parties and the press is relatively well informed of the positions of different parties. In contrast to the earlier period it is more appropriate to talk about an exogenous process of interest conciliation and articulation between parties in government. The process of translating the preferences of the majority into policy is complicated in a period of coalitions politics by two main considerations. Firstly, the constraint on coalitions associated with competitive re-alignment that has been discussed above. Secondly, the institutional weakness of the newer parties means they are unlikely to be completely effective mediators between voters and government. However the trends are not altogether negative. The emergence of new parties, such as the BSP, means that parties are more likely to represent a more homogenous constituency. Accountability for non-performance is much clearer in these
circumstances and the incentives to favour one part of a party’s constituency are reduced. These circumstances are more conducive for the articulation of the interests of a well defined constituency. Whether or not this occurs is an open question.

The shift away from endogenous interest articulation can be traced back to the impact of social change discussed earlier on the shape of Indian political parties. In the past the Congress Party in UP took responsibility for conciliating the interests of the three main groups that supported the party: the Brahmin castes, the former untouchables or Scheduled Castes and the Muslim minority. The latter two groups benefited least from this arrangement as the Congress Party became less effective as an institution for carrying out this task. At the same time the subordinate groups in this coalition became more assertive. The identification of the Congress elite in the state with Hindu nationalist causes encouraged Muslim voters to look to other parties to articulate their interests. In the case of the Scheduled Castes this assertion took shape around a growing sense of dalit identity(Pai, 1997). The label ‘dalit’ identifies the Scheduled Castes as oppressed and prepared to mobilise in order to rectify this situation.

The BSP offered a new channel for the articulation of dalit interests in the state and further undermined the Congress Party’s electoral strength. This part of the democratic equation has been restored to equilibrium. The failure of the old arrangement to express the views of two important minorities has been addressed. However the second half of the equation is unresolved. The ability of the political parties to facilitate popular influence over the state government is limited as no single party can win a majority and coalition arrangements have been notoriously unstable in UP(Wyatt, 1999). The old arrangement that sustained stable Congress governance involved the quiescence of the subordinate groups. This is no longer forthcoming even though the subordinate groups have not substantially improved their socio-economic status. The link between economic and political power has been broken but the new arrangement that links control of government power and electoral influence functions in an erratic fashion. The BSP has a certain amount of veto power in coalition formation based on the numerical strength of the dalit population in the state. Responsibility for creating a new equilibrium lies with the political parties even though they may face a difficult task in the context of cleavage conflict.
The breakdown of old arrangements for maintaining the dominance of elite groups within the Congress Party can be seen at work elsewhere in India. In the state of Maharashtra many dalit voters broke from the Congress Party and backed the Republican Party of India (RPI). This experiment failed as the RPI split into numerous factions and could not resist the depredations of the Congress Party who co-opted some of the more prominent RPI leaders. The RPI was widely regarded as a spent force in the 1970s and 1980s. However the party has become more united in recent years and entered a successful electoral arrangement with the Congress Party to fight the 1998 general elections. In other words if party leaders decide to they can re-assemble a new majority on the basis of an exogenously structured aggregation. The resulting compromise, should the parties form a government, may not be completely coherent but at least the interests of the supporters of the smaller party will not be ignored. The temptation to govern in favour of the dominant interests inside the Congress Party is displaced as coalition survival rests on the recognition of all parties. The subordinate groups that used to be marginalised inside Congress have in many cases gone it alone and now have much greater power of veto. Social change is important in determining the framework in which the parties perform their democratic function but elite leadership remains critical in determining its success.

The democratic infrastructure provided by the Congress Party in the early years of the republic is no longer a feature of Indian politics. The elitist leadership approach of direct unmediated appeals to the electorate has also been shown to wanting. The strength of regional parties means that coalition politics is likely to be the mode of governing at the national level for the foreseeable future. There are those who are sceptical about the possibilities for consolidation among the parties or stable coalition politics on the basis of parties organised on regional and caste lines (Kothari, 1996). However it is possible to be more optimistic about the prospects for stable government in slightly different circumstances. In December 1998 an opinion poll indicated that Congress would win a clear majority if a snap election were held (India Today, 28/12/98). Notwithstanding this evidence there are serious doubts as to the ability of the Congress Party to compete in the electorally critical states of Bihar and UP. These states return 139 of the 543 seats to the Lok Sabha and Congress won only 5 of them in 1998. A limited revival on the part of
Congress, a more likely scenario, would create the conditions for a more stable pattern of coalition politics to develop. This would involve regional and some smaller parties. This may not see a greatly improved democratic task being performed by the Indian political parties. However it seems to me a more plural and democratic outcome than government by a single national party that does not mediate effectively.
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