



## The Verdict of 2014 and the Indian Party System: Coalition to Probable Dominance

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### Abstract

The Indian party system in the last seven decades of post independence electoral politics has passed through many phases of qualitative changes. It began with predominance and within two decades started reflecting cracks and loosening of pan India control of the Indian Congress Party which received severe jolt in the year 1967 in the form of loss of political control in several states. Another turning point came in 1977 as the Congress lost power at the centre though for a brief period as it regained its position in mid-term election and established its dominance. However, the political turmoil which began in 1967 kept on impacting the general elections and finally it succeeded in breaking the monopolistic character of the Congress since late eighties and certainly since mid nineties. The Indian party system thereafter entered the era of coalition; initially unstable but later on stable. However, the sixteenth General elections came as another turning point in the course of Indian party system as the BJP despite being in coalition partner of NDA received majority of seats on its own. The next general election further consolidated numerical strength of BJP. This consistent pan India political ascendancy of BJP with inverse downslide of Congress and UPA has led to probable emergence of another era dominance , though with different features.

### Key Words

Party, System, Coalition, Predominance, Indian National Congress, BJP, UPA, NDA, Bi-nodal.

The exploratory purpose of the paper is to decode/ decipher the critical course of evolution/changes in the nature of the Indian party system which has attracted debate and discussion among the political scientists particularly after 16<sup>th</sup> general elections. The objective realities, at least in technical sense remains the same even after BJP gaining majority on its own as the continuum of a stable post-Congress phase of federalized bi-nodal party system within the broader theoretical canvas of polarized/ multi-party system. This third party system however suffered a serious challenge after the unexpected historic electoral outcome of the 16<sup>th</sup> General elections which saw the BJP gaining majority on its own which appeared more profound if the overall performance of the NDA is compared with the UPA in general and Congress in particular. In fact the electoral outcome has generated an unanticipated heat and dust among the keen observers of Indian political system about the possible paradigm shift in the party system whereby a new edition of dominant party system/ fourth party system may emerge without destroying the bi-nodal federalized features of the third party system. This concluding assumption is based on an in-depth analytical

conceptualization of the contextual phase of the Indian party system which is being explained succinctly in this chapter.

It would be pertinent therefore, to begin with explaining the democratic institutionalization of party system within the framework of a federal-parliamentary political system in decolonized India which started with many handicaps as compared to the well established advanced democracies of the world. In fact, it could not take off with a pluralistic character as the INC was able to establish its virtual monopoly/ hegemony by acquiring most of the political space available not only at the centre but in states as well. Though, in due course, the monistic character of the Indian party system came out of its systemic cage and came to represent a broad spectrum of competing ideologies, particularly conservative/right, progressive/left and the INC which represented a little left of the centre. As a matter of fact, despite evolving/emerging ideological trajectories of the political competition remained the dominant preserve of the INC with little/remote chances of opposition parties acquiring power. The political scientists, therefore, describes this sui-generis nature of party system as 'one-party dominance' ( Weiner, Myron, 1957, *Party Politics in India: The Development of a Multi-Party System*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, and 1967, *Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; First Edition; Morris-Jones, W H, *Dominance and Dissent: Their Inter-relation in the Indian Party System, Politics Mainly Indian*, Madras: Orient Longman) and 'Congress System' ( Kothari, Rajni, 1964, 'The Congress System in India,' *Asian Survey*, 4 December, pp 1161-73, ). Paradoxical it may sound but it is being described as an 'open system' which not only allowed substantially genuine competition between the ruling party and others but also reflected accommodating flexibility of the ruling party which did keep its door open for more interactions at the level of ideas and persons both. However, the gradual politicization/fragmentation and identity/region based articulation by emerging political elites led to erosion in the prevailing political system of competitive politics culminating into a major electoral setback in the system in 1967 whereby the INC not only suffered in the General elections but lost political power in eight states as well. The imminent shock was felt by the INC at the organizational level also as it had to face the first split in the party. The impact of above mentioned political shock proved temporary as the mid- term general elections of 1971-72 once again established supremacy of the INC under the leadership of Mrs. Gandhi. This domination of INC particularly at the centre continued till 1989 except for a brief interregnum during post-emergency general elections which led to replacement of INC by a combined opposition of Left, Right and centre known as Janata Party. In other words the anti-Congressim wave swept away the INC for the first time at centre which was hurriedly expressed by some scholars as an apparent paradigm shift toward bi-partisan party system. The political tremors and shocks which were somehow managed in keeping the system intact started showing signs of strong waves of pluralisation and regionalization of Indian politics in general and competitive politics in particular since early phase of 1990s. In other words the post 1967 setbacks to the Congress system which was effectively reversed and sustained could not last long as the developments since late 1980s in general and 1989 in particular started showing probably irreparable systemic cracks reflecting the changing contours in the nature of Indian party system.

The electoral politics, thus, sprang an unanticipated surprise in the General elections of 1989 not only to Indian political scientists but comparative theorists too. In fact it turned out to be the beginning of radical/path breaking mutation in the competitive politics at the centre with two distinct developments. First of all, it produced a fractured mandate with hung parliament and a coalition government in the formal sense. Secondly, the party system at the centre rekindled the hope of a multi-partisan character of the system which was reverted back to predominance after the premature demise of hurriedly huddled congregation of anti-congress parties under the political banner of Janata party. One of the keen observers of Indian party

system observed, “1989 has brought about an electoral revolution by inaugurating a multi-party system for the first time at the centre, even though the component of the system, in aggregate terms, had already become multi-partisan one at any rate by 1987 when nearly half of the states had come to be ruled by non-Congress parties of various varieties and vintage. By 1989 the ‘pilgrim’s progress’ has made it to Delhi.”( Mahendra Prasad Singh, ‘From Predominance to Polarized Pluralism: The Indian Party System’, Think India, Vol.II, No. 2, April-June 1990).

The evolutionary trajectory of the Indian party system as discussed in the chapter dealing with genealogy of systemic change in the era of coalition would suggest that informal traits of ideological diversities/ differences during the course of freedom struggle was in itself suggestive of plurality/polarization of party politics in independent India. In fact India’s diverse social milieu which was galvanized into a consensus based freedom struggle, particularly during Gandhian era probably can be visualized as the beginning of coalition oriented party system. Present phase of coalitional party politics in a multi-party system may have its roots in the confederal tenets of socio-cultural differentiation which probably was politically anesthetized by the ‘historical consensus/synthesis’ in favour of INC which got transformed overnight from a socio-political movement to a political party. It is being argued that coalitional politics of contemporary India which is the bi-product of pluralized/ multi-party system draws its inspiration from the similar ethos which was successfully achieved during the freedom movement reflecting unity of purpose within the framework of consensual decision making amidst diverse socio-cultural, political and ideological strands. It will not be out of context therefore to state that, “the consensual political culture that upholds coalition was a legacy of the freedom struggle which tried to base the concept of Indian unity on a confederal approach to cultures”.(Chakrabarty Bidyut, 2014, ‘Coalition Politics in India’, Oxford, New Delhi, p 169). Hence, situating contemporary nature of the Indian party system require an explanatory note, in a nut shell, as to how it has evolved from an embryonic stage of freedom struggle to ongoing era of coalitional competitive politics. The discussion on genealogical evolution of the party system in India explicitly explains that the INC may have come into existence as a ‘safety valve’ but gradually it acquired a distinct organizational feature which not only encouraged consensual assimilation of divergent view points but also acted as an ingenious prototype of competitive politics which laid the foundation of party system. The pre-independence tone and tenor of the party system which has had its bearing on the future course of evolution can be traced back to interactive engagements among the trinity of political architecture, the INC, AIML and the colonial power. In fact “a triangular political interaction involving the INC, AIML and the colonial government had set the tone of party politics in India in a party system framework”. (Mehra Ajay k, ed., 2013, ‘Introduction, in Party System in India: Emerging Trajectories, Lancer, New Delhi, p 33). The partitioned independence may have ended the triangular oppositional political engagements but its politico-ideational impact could not be erased. In this contextual background INC emerged as a political party which was neither homogenous socially nor monolithic ideologically as it gave space to both, potentially political friends and foe. In other words it appeared as an assortment of incompatible ideological strands with dominating left to the centre approach of INC for future Indian polity. Consequently, it acted as an omnipotent political force with politically harmless/unthreatening creature within its umbrella who acted as an opposition without being in a position to challenge its might which led to its victories in successive general elections avoiding any real threat to alternation till 1967. “The inadequacies of the other players- the Communist Party, a few Socialist parties, the pro privatization Swatantra party, the right wing Jan Sangh and sub-national regional parties- on the political scene fueled that dominance. While a raft of opposition parties keenly contested elections, opposition forces were badly fragmented, which limited their ability to mount a serious campaign to unseat the Congress. Instead, the most salient political competition often

occurred between factions within the Congress party representing different ideological viewpoints.” ( Vaishnav Milan and, Hinton Jamie, ' The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System', Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2019, p 9; also Chhibber Pradeep and Verma Rahul, 'Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party System of India', particularly ch.1, ' State Formation and Ideological Conflict in Multiethnic Countries', New York, Oxford University Press, 2018). Another, distinct feature of the Congress system which should be kept in mind is that “ despite the party's reputation as a big-tent party, the Congress was significantly controlled by the upper castes, who accounted for the lion's share of its elected representatives at the state and national levels and its most prominent, visible national leaders.”( Milan and Hinton, p 9). In fact, the INC which is being credited with bringing together numerous 'identity and groups' in its socio-political umbrella relied/depended upon big men who enjoyed material and political power and acted as political buckle in forging the relationship between the Congress leaders and rank and file of the party on the one hand and 'competing points of views' on the other. ( Kumar, Ravinder, "Introduction", in Gupta, Amit Kumar,ed., 'Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47, New Delhi, Manohar, 1987,p Xiii-Xviii, at p Xxiv-XXV).This organizational features of accommodating diverse social interests for acting as an agent of maintaining equilibrium within the socio-political reality of internal competition among shifting political coalitions within the party continued after independence. ( Dua, Bhagwan D, " Congress Dominance Revisited", in Brass, Paul r and Francis, Robinson,( eds) , The Indian National Congress and Indian Society, 1885-1985, Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Dominance, Delhi, Chanakya Publications, 1987, p 349-372, at p 357). The above assertions explicitly implies that the political power was monopolized by socially and economically upper strata of the diverse social structure at both the levels of federal institutions and the numerically most populous but disadvantaged sections of the society kept waiting for their appropriate place/ accommodation in the scheme of recruitment within the predominant/ Congress system.

The process of democratization and political socialization gradually percolated top down on the one hand and the internal thermostat of mediation and absorption of rising socio-political demands of factions started flaring up within the INC. In other words the intra-party democratic structure of the INC started facing severe stress and strain due to its inability to co-opt new political challengers who were emerging at regional levels. The increasing gap between the old guards and those who took side of Mrs. Gandhi exposed the growing organizational weakness of the INC. In the given troubled times INC had to face twin challenge of keeping its flock together and face the fourth General elections, 1967. The political outcome was expectedly shocking as the INC not only lost political power in almost half of the states on the one hand and there was a split in the party on the other. The INC could retain its majority in the parliament but electoral tremor was certainly felt in the sub-national regions which in the long run spread its zone of political influence leading ultimately to pluralization /fragmentation and emergence of coalitional consensus in place of 'historical consensus'/ Congress system. It was being articulated by Kothari as a 'dramatic change' which brought gloom in the rank and files of the Congress but cheer and excitement among the opposition and the maturing electorate which not only demolished strong political fortresses in several states but reduced the ' margin of preponderance' of Congress in the parliament as well. In fact, sounding uncertainty for the future of Indian party system he clearly said that “In many respects, the 1967 elections signaled a new phase in the development of Indian polity”. ( ( Kothari, Rajni,Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.6, No. 3/5, Annual Number, Jan. 1971, p 231). This democratic upheaval certainly indicated the growing political consciousness among the politically disadvantaged strata of the society whose numerical preponderance was being used by the opposition and the dissenters of the INC to their political advantages in the electoral battle. Kothari also has similar prognosis about the unprecedented debacle of the INC as he clearly explained the symptom: “The

socio-economic and demographic profile of the polity is changing rather fast...The mobilization of new recruits and groups into the political process...has 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, while of continuing importance, have become increasingly circumvented as citizens search for more effective participation in the political market place and develop an ability to evaluate and make choice.” ( Kothari, Rajni, 1970 , ‘ Continuity and Change in the Indian Party System’ Asian Survey, pp 937-48, November). The political formulations therefore clearly suggest that the electoral verdict of 1967 was a symptom of socio-political churning which indicated transformation of Indian party system from symbolic competition to actual and fierce competitive politics at least at the level of states on the one hand and consequent assertive roles of the state centric sub-national parties in future Indian polity. It is being argued, therefore, that “Cracks in the Congress control over power were first seen in the 1967, when it was defeated in the assembly elections in many of the states of the country. This signaled the rise of a competitive party system in the states”. ( Shastri, Sandeep, ‘Party System and Democracy in India’, in Mehra, Ajay Kumar, ed., Party System in India- Emerging Trajectories-, Lancer, New Delhi, 2013, p 159). The threat to prevailing Congress/dominant system, however, proved temporary for two reasons: first of all, the numeric preponderance of the INC certainly got reduced but it did not face any threat of alternation in parliament in 1967.

The alarm bell rung by the electoral verdict certainly was an indicator that given a choice the people may not hesitate to decide in favour of other alternatives available. In a way the 4<sup>th</sup> General elections did pose a serious threat to so far undisputed/ unchallenged hegemonic Congress/predominant system. The situation however could not be reversed and it was getting clearer that political system in general and competitive politics in particular has started moving in the direction of pluralization/fragmentation. The probable systemic change after this first democratic upsurge ( if we use the phrase used by Yogendra Yadav) may have many socio-economic and political factors but the critical factor remains the centralization/ pyramidal orientation of the leadership/ high command of the INC during the 1970s which not only compelled the dissidents to move away from the party but also encouraged and emboldened the centrifugal forces who tried to flare up the identity based region specific demands which certainly proved detrimental to the existence of the Congress system. In the realm of party politics the emergence of more assertive and effective regional parties may be seen nothing less than a “second party system”, the first being the Congress system. ( Jha, Prem Shankar, In the Eye of the Cyclone: The Crisis in Indian Democracy, New Delhi, Penguin, 1993, as referred in Vaishnavi, Milan, and Hinton, Jamie, p 9) The causal explanation of such a game changing electoral behaviour, particularly in the 70s and 80s, therefore, is to be traced in the changing organizational norms of the INC. it is being argued therefore, that extreme centralization of decision making disregarding the preexisting autonomy to state units of the party virtually closed the interactive mediational mechanism of the grass root issues. It destroyed the federal and coalitional ethos of the Congress system on the one hand and provided an opportunity to dissenters as well as centrifugal forces on the other which accelerated the process of identity based regionalized competitive process which did play a critical role during and after the 1967 general elections. (Chakrabarty, Bidyut, Coalition Politics in India, Oxford, 2013, p 10). The systemic change was the bi-product of institutionalization of democracy which more often than not produces its own logic and unforeseen results, argues Chandhoke. The implosion of “Congress system” was caused by formation of regional parties by the breakaway Congress leaders who not only competed with the hegemonic INC but led to disastrous debacle of the INC in states and the party thereafter could not regain complete power in the length and breadth of the country. Moreover, the 1970s the INC suffered from ‘organizational atrophy’ primarily due to over centralization of

policy making. Consequently its capacity to represent or mediate between plural and conflicting views suffered irreversible setback as it lost its touch with the grass roots/ people whose trust it has had since days of freedom struggle. (Chandhoke, Neera, 'India 2014: Return of The One Party System', I A I Working Papers 14/8, June 2014, p 5).

No doubt it reestablished its predominance which was temporarily threatened once again in 1977 by the non-congress conglomeration of Janata Party which collapsed under its own weight of politico-ideological contradictions. However, this temporary alternation of power did revive the hope of replacing the dominance of Congress by an appropriate political alliance/coalition in future. Moreover, despite unsuccessful attempt of dethroning the INC it certainly proved that political space was getting fragmented/ crowded as competitive space was getting more pluralized and political parties were consolidating their zones of political influence. The see saw game of competitive politics between predominance and plurality kept on going till the 1989 elections which signaled the probability of a post-Congress party system which somehow got delayed for another five years after mid-term general elections of 1991. The collapse of political crutch supported National Front government and tragic assassination of Rajiv Gandhi did give a lease of life to the INC which survived to sustain its minority government for the full term amidst growing caution that it may be prelude to end of Congress era as well as Congress system. Though, INC came to power in 1991 but it must not be forgotten that the anti-congress forces were gaining ground at the national level and the party system was getting competitive and polarized/pluralized which escaped the critical review of the political analysts as fragmented and fractured mandate could not produce a sustainable coalition. In other words INC could survive and thrive due to a viable coalitional alternative as no other party were close to replace it singularly. In such a period the political system came across three ideological engagements- Mandal, Mandir and Market- which proved critical in deciding the journey of Indian politics in general and party system in particular. "Whatever semblance of Congress dominance that remained after 1967 would come to an end in 1989, which denoted the start of coalition governance in New Delhi and the third party system. Although the Congress's grasp on national power had gradually weakened in the 1960s and 1970s, by the end of the following decade it had completely given way to a multi-polar constellation of forces in which the Congress was no longer the single pole around which politics revolved. Three powerful forces- often termed Mandal, masjid and market- disrupted Indian politics, prompting a realignment in politics" ( Vaishnav and Hinton, p 11). Ideologically speaking Mandalisation of politics gave an opportunity to crystallise/ political behaviour on the basis of caste whereas Mandir-Masjid dichotomy was used to polarize on the basis of a macro identity based politics or Hindutva. Both the above strains ultimately gave a heavy blow to the Congress system as the general elections of 1996 proved to be virtually an end of era. It proved historic as BJP emerged as the potential centre of power by aggregating more parliamentary seats than the INC despite getting less vote share. However, the INC succeeded in keeping the BJP out of power by extending outside support to another conglomeration of centrist parties with critical role of the state parties. In a way it was a beginning of federal ethos of the party system as the state parties and leadership emerged key players in formation of the government. The INC, instead of rectifying its organizational weaknesses relied more on playing dirty trick of extending and withdrawing outside support in anticipation of gaining power as it did in 1989. It is being argued by Mehra that post- '96 phase of electoral competition sprang several paradoxes. First of all, in the history of post-independence competitive politics of democracy a single party-BJP- on its own surpassed the tally of INC in terms of seat share. The fragmented outcome of the General elections reflects the role of first-past-the-poll-system on the one hand and 'magic of seat adjustment' among the anti-Congress parties on the other. Secondly, despite getting the largest seat share the party could not form a government. In terms of party system framework it would appear that most of the parties failed to appreciate the imminent change

which was knocking the door as they were looking for non-Congress but a centrist alternative. In fact hesitancy in allowing non centrist option did nothing but opened door for a non-Congress and non-BJP front or the third front. ( Mehra, Ajay, k, Party System in India, ed., Lancer, New Delhi, 2013, p 77). As expected the politically expedient policy of non-BJP centrist formation took place with the outside support of numerically larger party-INC- on the one hand and cobbling/stitching of post-poll alliance was accomplished in such a manner that the sub-national/regional parties got an opportunity to call the shots. Though the government could not remain stable but from the point of view of party system it became evident that the increasing number of competitors, particularly at the sub-national level not only increased their seat share in the parliament but also implied their critical role in shaping and re-orienting future of Indian politics. It is argued therefore, that shrinking political space/ vacuum was rapidly occupied/ grabbed by as many as 28 parties with strong regional roots who intensified the level of political competition by invoking flattery of ‘popular cultural sensibilities’. (Khilnani,S. 1997, The Idea of India, London, Hamish Hamilton, p 57). The important point from the perspective of party system which came to light after this General elections is to be traced in the fact that “ a quarter of the votes polled and as many seats went to state parties, increasing their bargaining power.”( Mehra, Ajay, k, Party System in India, ed. Lancer, New Delhi, 2013, p 77). The General elections of 1998 followed by withdrawal of support to Gujral by INC could not change the qualitative result except that BJP being the largest party decided to form the government once again. Unlike 1996 misadventure this time the BJP tried and succeeded in getting political support from many parties which raised the hope of a stable coalition. Unfortunately this experiment could not last long and yet another General election took place in 1999. Gradually it was becoming clear that despite national parties getting the larger share of the electoral politics none of these could form government without coalition in which the state/ regional parties have had critical role. In such a situation of continuous fractured mandate and resultant hung parliament the BJP took initiative of forming a pre-election alliance under the banner of NDA. Not only that it postured to put its hard core Hindutva ideology on the back burner which transformed its character from political untouchable to acceptable leading ally. It is imperative to discuss and reflect the changes in the competitive politics/ party system by contextualizing in the hindsight the emergence of BJP (the erstwhile BJP) as another probable pole of growing consensus against the Congress system. The deft political moves of BJP after its inability to single handedly replace the system on the issue of Hindutva led to course correction in their attempt to bridge the socio-political and geographical gap in political expansion. The BJP was quick to realize that unless it expands in the south and east zones of the country on the one hand and succeeds in a positive social engineering by penetrating in the political psyche of numerically strong OBCs, Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes and disadvantaged it may not become effective in terms of filling up the vacuum created by the crumbling Congress system. Thus, it harped on harnessing/ practicing the Kautilya’s much appreciated Mandal theory which exhorts the practicing political elites to go for befriending enemy of one’s enemy. “What guided the BJP in its spree for alliance was the old dictum of enemy’s enemy being one’s friend.” ( Chakrabarty, Bidyut, Coalition Politics in India, Oxford, New Delhi, 2014, p 19). Probably this prompted BJP to initiate the policy of political alliances with political parties of all shades and colour in general and anti-Congress in particular. This was the only route available to expand its political reach from the existing catchment areas of north India/ cow belt to other parts the country. Such a change in its strategy was basically an extension of its ongoing successful alliances at the state level with regional parties who were fighting protracted electoral battle against the INC. This move had succeeded primarily because the party not only decided to suspend/ tone down its ideological moorings but also agreed to some common minimum programme. “In order to guarantee its acceptability among the regional allies, the BJP relegated the contentious issues to the background by adopting a

pledge to provide a ‘dynamic, pro-people, pro-development, and anti- status-quoist (sic) government of consensus building through deliberations[ because] several major national issues confronting India today cannot be effectively addressed without evolving a broad platform of national consensus” ( Chakrabarty, p 19). This ideological compromise/shift by the BJP was necessitated to appear centrist as most of the political parties might not have endorsed and aligned with it without satisfactory initiative in that direction. “So, by redefining its ideological character in the context of coalition, the BJP sustained its viability as a pole around which the anti-Congress parties congregated.” (Chakrabarty, p 20).

The pragmatic move by BJP did help it in stitching alliances/coalition partners among its political bête noire during the general elections of 1998 which led to formation of coalition government by the new coalition/alliance called NDA. However, the withdrawal of AIDMK from NDA not only led to one vote defeat of the thirteen month old NDA but also made it explicitly clear that in the ‘highly competitive and fractious party system’ the life of coalition depends on art of managing alliance.( Mehra, Ajay K, Party System in India, ed. , Lancer, New Delhi, 2013, p 35). Unlike the INC which may not have realized the onset of coalition based party politics, the BJP worked hard to strengthen its coalition which paid a rich dividend and NDA ii not only succeeded in getting majority of seats but also got the credit of sustaining a coalition government for the full term. It also came to light that the BJP could lead the coalition to victory despite getting less voting percentage than the INC. It certainly implies that” under the first-past-the-poll-system poll strategizing was crucial.” (Mehra, p 77).Another notable feature of the electoral verdict was that 30 percent of seats in the Lok Sabha were captured by the state based/regional parties who became essentially critical component of the emerging post Congress party system. In other words the post 89 developments in parliamentary system of India did reflect federalization of party system with assertiveness of sub-national/regional parties in the era of coalition. It is being argued that the post Congress phase of party system provided an opportunity to many smaller and regional parties to acquire pre-eminent position at the national arena of political system which added a new dimension to the paradigm shift in the nature of party system of India.“Although their existence was nothing new, what was striking was their entry into national politics in the changed socio-political environment.” (Chakrabarty, Coalition Politics In India, Oxford, New Delhi, 2014, p 37). In fact an analytical travelogue of the party system changes during 1990s would reveal that there was emerging trends of increasingly omnipotent presence of the state centric political parties in the formation of government. Initially the governing coalitions emerged without any effective institutional mechanism of interactive coordinating management among the collaborative political parties. Successive short spans of coalitions, however, led to development of coalition oriented organizational structures of inter-allies engagement which has successfully been sustaining the coalition governments.

The electoral performance of NDA in 1999 and uninterrupted fractured mandate particularly since 1996 probably convinced the political elites of the INC to sincerely appreciate the changing socio- political dynamics and act accordingly so that they remain politically alive and relevant in the changed political environment of competitive politics. Thus, following the success of NDA and realizing their potential inability to compete alone in the competitive politics the INC initiated, though reluctantly, the process of alliances before the upcoming general elections of 2004. “In fact, the success of the BJP’s alliance making effort, the Congress gives up its smugness on coalitions, realizing that the social coalition that supported it had splintered: it too had to work for a political coalition. This leads to the emergence of binodal party system.” ( Mehra, Ajay, K , Party System in India, Lancers, New Delhi, 2013, p 78). It did pay rich political dividends to INC led alliance as it succeeded in gaining political power more than a decade of political exile. The alliance succeeded in gaining people’s mandate in back to back general elections in 2004 and 2009. However, one thing which remained unchanged was the critical role of the state/regional parties in sustaining the



coalition. It is interesting to point out that since NDA came to power in 1999 till 2009 the stability of the successive coalition governments- both NDA and UPA- have been dependent on the state parties ; many of these did not hesitate in switching sides on their political cost and benefit analysis. Thus, the epicenter of political battle/ competition got altered towards the state which certainly had tremendous impact on the political system in general and party system in particular. ( Sandeep Shastri, Party System and Democracy in India: Distinctive Features at The National And Local Level, in Ajay Mehra (ed) , Party System in India: Emerging Trajectories ,Lancer, 2014, pp 164-165). Shastri explained this change in the party system as a result of emerging bi-polarity competition in which the state/regional parties have got assertive position in the framework of federal multilayered electoral politics. He, therefore, makes a distinction between party system at the national level and state level and comes to the conclusion that the contemporary nature of the party system is not only polarized at the state level but also reflective of aggregation at the national level.( ibid, p160). In such a federalization of the party system the political bosses of the state/regional parties have more often than not come to call the decisive shots during the coalitional regimes of both the NDA and The UPA. “ If the 2009 Lok Sabha elections were taken as a site for analysis it is found that in deciding who to vote for, citizens tend to value state leaders much more than the national leaders.” ( Shastri, Leadership at the State Level Mattered, Economic and Political Weekly, 64:39, pp 88-91). Political analysts like Balveer Arora and Kailash have tried to analyse this significant change in the party system as federalization rather than fragmentation of politics. They do not accept bipolar thesis rather suggest that the distinct features of the change in the party system reflect the properties of bi-nodal system which is flexible enough to allow free movement of political actors between the poles. They opine that, “...the twin thesis of a bi-nodal and federalized party system put forward in the wake of the 1998 and 1999 general elections continues to be validated...The bi-nodal system today has two political parties which constitute the principal nodes of the system. The Congress and the BJP not only contest across the polity, but also win seats from different parts of the country, their primary objective becomes the containment of the other and arriving in first position to be able to pull together a federal coalition.” ( Balveer Arora an K.K Kailash, The New Party System: Federalised and Binodal, in Ajay K. Mehra (ed), Party System in India : Emerging Trajectories, Lancer, N.Delhi, 2013, p 259.) In this bi-nodal party system the core members of alliance have remained almost static; the bulk of political allies keep switching the nodes on the basis of their politico-administrative requirements. Political allies have not shied away from appropriating benefits through bargaining at one level and opposing it at another level. In other words the same political actor takes different stand at different levels of politico-institutional structures wherein ideological affinity or differences does seem to play a secondary role; the primary being political expediency. Referring to Trinamool and DMK it is being explained that “In both the NDA and the UPA, the party has sought to use its leverage at the national level to sap the support base of the state government and to carve out its own constituency.... However, both parties quit the coalition and joined opposition alliances in their respective states. After the state elections were over, both parties returned to the NDA without much ado.” (ibid, p 258).

The party system in the phase of coalition has been explained as third electoral/party system by Yogendra Yadav. The post congress era of coalition politics has been witness of continuity with change in the democratic politics of India in general and party system in particular. The most critical component of this change is to be seen in the absence of unipolarity/ central pole in the national politics. Though the process of erosion had started in the 1967 but somehow the pendulum of systemic change kept on swinging in favour of INC led domination particularly at the level of national politics. However this continuum of domination with gradual decay ultimately started settling in favour of multiparty coalitional politics since 1989. And finally since 1996 the polity entered into a new era of party politics

with distinct features which may be called 'post congress' party system. "A continuous decline in the vote share for the Congress in the every election stands out as the defining feature of this distribution of vote shares. Clearly the changes are so basic that we are justified in talking of a new party system." (Yogendra Yadav, Electoral Politics in The Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.34, No. 34/35, August 21-September 3, 1999, p 2395). This significant change has been ensured by the possibility of viable options to electorate which was not available during the dominant era, particularly at the level of national arena as the voters had only one option; either vote for or against the Congress. This became possible by consistent rise and growth of BJP at pan India level since 1984 which was further consolidated by its ideological moderation which helped it in expanding its horizon from an urban based Brahmin-Baniya party to catch all party. Consequently it succeeded in removing the tag of 'politically untouchable' which helped it in getting non-left centrist parties joining hands with the political formation called NDA. "In political-ideological terms, the party has expanded to win the confidence of various allies who have little patience with its Hindutva ideology."(ibid,p 2395). The political system in general and party system in particular witnessed attempts of Anti-BJP and Anti-Congress third alternative political coalition of Left and centrist parties as well but for all practical purposes such a move could not succeed in breaking the ongoing bi-nodal/bi-polar contestation. In fact the Left parties themselves have been losing grounds in their political bastions to the BJP and regional/state parties. These parties have been reduced to territorial boundaries of specific geographical regions despite their consistent pro-poor and anti-market ideological stand which certainly has reduced its say in national politics. Another significant feature of third party system has been fragmentation and increased volatility due mainly because of entry of regional parties in the national parties which has increased the choices on the one hand and confusion to decide the right choice on the other. This confusion is generally not to be seen in the state elections during the same phase of coalition era as most of the states have reflected a stable bi-polar party system. The party system at the national level unlike the state politics however has not remained simply bipolar rather it has been reflecting 'multiple bi-polarity'. ( ibid, 2396). Yet another distinct feature of this phase of party politics has been increasing participation as well as representational opportunities to the marginalized sections in general and OBCs in particular who are numerically preponderant and politically decisive as well. "As such the OBCs are the biggest gainer in the race for political parties to accommodate them in their organizational and legislative wings."( ibid,p 2397). Explaining the rising stakes and empowerment of marginalized groups in third party system it is being argued that Shudras/ lower rung among OBCs, Dalits, Tribals and women have shown much more active participation in exercising their right to vote and get representation in the organizational and legislative bodies of the system. In terms of socio-political interactive mechanism of electoral participation it has been seen that during this phase of third party system unlike the previous pattern of higher participation by the urban and higher caste people the citizens from lower social/caste order and rural India have displayed greater enthusiasm with critical impact on the system. "The participatory upsurge of the sudras is the defining characteristics of the Third electoral system. The continuous influx of people increasingly from the lower orders of society in the arena of democratic contestation provides the setting, the stimuli and the limits to how the electoral system unfolds."(ibid, p ,2397). It may not be inappropriate to mention here that no doubt the modern language of 'development' and 'globalisation' made inroads in the political idioms of contestation but the indigenous ideological input of 'social justice' with a growing emphasis on primordial basis of identity played no less role in deciding the democratic destiny of the system during the coalitional phase of party system in India. "The emergence of 'social justice' as a rubric to talk about the caste equity, political, political representation of castes

and communities and issues of communitarian self-respect and identity is a distinct achievement of this period.” (ibid,p 2397).

The above analytical explanations would suggest that the post 1989 political turmoil almost settled in favour of a multi-party coalitional era which was referred as post Congress bi-nodal system or third party system. In other words there was a consensus among scholars that the party system has left behind the era of dominance as multi-party induced coalition was the natural fait accompli in the given situation of competitive politics spearheaded by two principle competing alliances/nodes –NDA and UPA. However, the unprecedented/historical electoral verdict of general elections in 2014 led to academic turn around as many scholars have found reasons to believe that the Indian party system is showing symptoms of another qualitative change/paradigm shift which may herald the fourth party system. The main reason for such assertions by academic was based on performance of the BJP which was able to get comfortable majority in the parliamentary elections on its own which became more impressive by adding the number of seats won by allies of the NDA. “The BJP’s breakthrough in 2014, therefore, prompted a debate whether India had left the era of multipolarity, fragmentation, and coalitions behind in favour of a new, dominant party system in which the BJP assumed the role of central pole that the Congress had once played.” (Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton, *The Dawn of India’s Fourth System*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, p 1). However, there was no unanimity among the scholars as the verdict despite being historic could have been temporary. Similar views were expressed by Sridharan in his analysis of 2014 verdict: “The results were dramatic, possibly even epochal. The electoral patterns of the last quarter- century have undergone a sea change, and the world’s largest democracy now has what appears to be a new party system headed by a newly dominant party.” (Eswaran Sridharan, *India’s Watershed Vote: Behind Modi’s Victory*, *Journal of Democracy*,25, no. 4, 2014, pp 20-33). Another comment worth mentioning was made by Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma who predicted that with the resounding performance, “the BJP has clearly replaced the Congress as the system defining party” which might give it an opportunity to become the, “focal point of electoral alignment and re-alignment” in India. (As quoted/referred by Vaishnav and Hinton , op. cit, p1). The probability of change was also asserted by Vaisnav and Smog who wrote that, “India may well have closed the book on twenty-five years of electoral politics and moved into a new era.”(Milan Vaishnav and Danielle Smogard, *A New Era in Indian Politics*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June

10,2014,<https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/10/new-era-in-indian-politics-pub-55883>).

Tillin was also cautious in his remarks when he asserted that empirical data is “somewhat equivocal as to whether the 2014 elections mark a departure in longer term electoral patterns or the consolidation of a new social bloc behind the BJP.”(Louise Tillin, *Indian Elections 2014: Explaining the Landslide*, *Contemporary South Asia*, 23, no. 2, 2015, 117-22). Though there are many political scientists who were not willing to predict any definite probability of a paradigm shift in the system on the basis of solitary but strong performance of the BJP. It was argued that, “From the perspective of the vote shares won by the won by the country’s main political parties, not as much has changed as the news headlines may suggest.” ( Adam Ziegfield,, *India’s Election Isn’t as Historic as People Think*”, *Monkey Cage*( blog), *Washington Post*, as quoted by Vaishnav and Hinton, op. cit., p 1). Rekha Diwakar, another keen watcher of Indian politics, does not agree with those scholars who were emphatically signaling the arrival of a new party system. She was of the opinion that, “although the Congress decline has continued, and the BJP has won many recent state assembly elections, it is premature to conclude that the Indian party system has shifted to a BJP dominated one.” (Rekha Diwakar, *Change and Continuity in Indian Politics and the Indian Party System: Revisiting the Results of the 2014 Indian General Elections*,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2, no 4,, 2017, 327-46). Another skeptical note of caution

was prescribed by Oliver Heath who wrote,: “ In terms of how durable this process of electoral change turns out to be, the BJP has cause for both optimism and caution. Given the fluidity and volatility of Indian elections at the constituency level, direct conversions are unlikely to be particularly stable.” (Oliver Heath,, The BJP’s Return to Power: Mobilisation, Conversion and Vote Swing in the 2014 Elections, Contemporary South Asia ,23, no. 2,2015, pp 123-35).

The above comments of political scientists clearly indicate that there is complete unanimity among the scholars that the 16<sup>th</sup> general elections have unexpectedly been a political game changer as the electoral outcome has given a clear mandate in favour of the BJP which no other party could achieve in the preceding three decades of coalition/ minority governments. However, they have also indicated the future of Indian party system whereby some scholars see the early signs of emerging second dominance or fourth party system whereas others are keeping their fingers crossed as any paradigm shift has to be based on repeat performance as well as certain visible changes in the critical components of the third party system. Hence, before jumping to any conclusive assertion it would be logical to discuss continuity and change in the nature of competitive politics as reflected during the general election in 2014.

Looking back at the evolution of party system during the post-Congress era of coalition politics it becomes apparent that the nature of party system has not been static rather it kept changing which was crystal clear in the nature of coalition. While the first phase witnessed the unstable governments the second phase saw the rise and growth of stable coalitions-NDA and UPA- led and headed by the two polity wide parties BJP and INC respectively. In this phase of competitive politics the states virtually emerged as the creator and destroyer of the governments as the regional/ state parties held the key of bi-nodal competitive politics without compromising their autonomy. “As a result, they also ensured that power alternated only between them at the all India level, although they could not outsmart the many state-level players from ruling at the state level, forcing the lead parties in both coalitions to bend quite often.” (India’s 2014 Lok Sabha Elections: Critical Shifts in the Long Term, Caution in The Short Term, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 49, No. 39, p 40). Interestingly, the structure of competition remained unchanged during the 2014 as there was little change in the effective number of parties but there was startling change in the vote share and seat share of the BJP which probably has led to rethinking about the prospective signs of change in the system of competitive politics. This thinking has been strengthened by the fact that the worst ever performance by the INC has certainly created a situation of political imbalance at the level of national politics as the state parties despite having potential importance shall have to be contented with their role restricted to the states at least till the next general elections. Technically “coalitions would still continue to be political necessity but the internal equation within the NDA has changed in such a fashion that the partners of NDA have to be content with being satellites of the BJP. Thus the balance within the NDA and that between the nationwide parties (particularly the BJP) and the state parties has also shifted in favour of the BJP.”( *ibid*, p 41). The above critical remarks, no doubt, reflect the possibility of a systemic change.

In terms of continuity with the established predictable pattern of competition and the outcome it has been pointed out by many scholars that despite getting majority on its own the BJP got almost 75% of its seats from states of northern, eastern and central regions. The reasons of such a performance in these states are found in satisfaction of the voters in the BJP ruled states combined with dissatisfaction of the voters in the Congress ruled states. “Thus, satisfaction with the state government appears to be the key determinant in most states, probably with the exception of only Karnataka where the Congress could not cash on the double satisfaction...except Kerala and Karnataka, in all Congress-ruled states, people were dissatisfied with the state government more than the central government.” ( *ibid*,p 42). Moreover, the BJP had very limited presence in the governance of the state-in merely 5

states- which remained a critical component in sustaining the political equilibrium under both the regimes; NDA as well as UPA. ( Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton, *The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2019, p 2).

Those scholars who have argued that the competitive politics of India in the post 16<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections has marked the beginning of a new party system are of the opinion that despite being multi-party the party system has displayed many features which would appear as structural break from the existing principles of third party system on more than one count. Moreover, it has also displayed some additional features which may be considered equally important of this evolving new party system; important among these being factors like ' BJP's ideological hegemony, its organization and fundraising prowess, and its charismatic leadership (as manifest by Prime Minister Modi.' (ibid, p3). One of the important dimensions of the third party system that has almost been demolished is the central premise that reiterates absence of a central pole in national politics. Although, the BJP has had tasted this position for the first time the chances of continued performance may not be discounted completely and 'it may emerge as the only other truly national party to give the Congress a serious fight across multiple states.' (ibid, p 6). Secondly, unlike the tenets of third party system the victory margin of BJP candidates in general marked significant increase in this election. Thirdly, the notion of state being the theatre of politics leading to greater federalization as a reflection of aggregation of the electoral outcome at national level has seriously been threatened. Fourthly, unlike the low voter turnout in the national elections compared to the state elections the results of the 2014 clearly established that it has broken the status quo by marked surge in the turnout of voters.

Emerging hegemonic character of the BJP in the post-2014 general elections is another critical dimension. Some of the political scientists have been of the opinion that the outcome may be treated/ interpreted as the early indication of probable change in the competitive politics of India. Hegemony has been one of the cardinal parameters of describing the post-independence Congress era as the predominant phase of competitive politics. Taking cue from the first phase of dominance Palshikar defined hegemony as that attribute of party system which consists of two critical components: ideology and electoral performance. Further, he says that the BJP has already proved its resurgence in terms of critical components of analyzing party's performance in the general elections concerned. The BJP has also succeeded in getting its ideological notions of hindu/ cultural nationalism and a new developmentalism approved by the masses in the form of getting majority on its own. In fact what is apparently writing on the walls of Indian democracy can be explained as an example of saturating the ideological as well political space of the competitive politics by the BJP under the leadership of Modi. ( Suhas Palshikar, *Towards Hegemony: BJP Beyond Electoral Dominance*, Economic and Political Weekly, 53, No. 33, August18,2018, pp 36-42).

Another dimension which resembles the era of predominance is the charismatic leadership of Modi who virtually emerged as the single gravitational force of the political challenge to the competing political parties; national and regional both. In fact he replicated his electoral experiences of Gujrat in this general election as well whereby he used to exhort the voters that vote for Modi would automatically imply vote for BJP; in a way projecting himself as synonym with the party. According to Palshikar, "The rise of Narendra Modi as the central figure, around whom the BJP's campaign revolved, made the elections something of a plebiscite on the leader...the presidential turn gave a sudden fillip to the BJP by infusing new life in the party and enthused the party that otherwise looked drifting and listless a year ago." ( Suhas Palshikar, *India's 2014 Lok Sabha Elections: Critical Shifts in the Long Term, Caution in the Short Term*, Economic and Political Weekly, September 27, 2014, Vol. XLIX, No. 39, P 39). Sridharan also echos the same argument about charismatic leadership when he says that " Surveys suggest that the Modi factor was vital to the BJP's success...the 2014 election can be said to have been quasi-presidential." (Eswaran Sridharan, *India's*

Watershed Vote Behind Modi's Victory, Journal of Democracy, October 2014, 25,(4) p28). In other words it can be said that what Nehru and Indira Gandhi could achieve in maintaining and sustaining the dominance of INC within the framework of party politics the result of 16<sup>th</sup> general elections may attract similar attention for Modi in terms of his charismatic leadership which could not be matched by any other political leader. "Modi managed to presidentialize a parliamentary election by making the election principally a vote on his leadership. Here, the opposition's leadership deficit was the mirror image of Modi's exalted status: there was not a single opposition leader who had the stature or popularity to favourably compete head-to-head with Modi." (Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton, The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, September, 2019, p 21).

The emphatic victory of BJP which attracted attention of political scientists all over the world as the Indian political system was devoid of such an electoral outcome for almost three decades and there was remote chances that in the continuing era of coalition politics the party system would come to such a stage that an era of new party system may be anticipated. No doubt some political analysts have traced the nascent but firm tendencies towards emergence of fourth party system but there are many scholars who despite finding many shifts in the core elements of party system are of the opinion that it would be too early to pronounce the complete and final break down of the third party system. It is being argued that the landslide victory is based on electoral performance of the BJP in 9 states rather than based on pan India performance; it must be able to reduce its dependency on these states by expanding nationally so that it could compete aggressively for the plurality vote share particularly in southern and eastern states. Secondly, one should not lose sight of the objective reality that BJP could improve its seat share primarily because of alliances with regional parties which helped it gain in at least 57 of its 282 seats. No doubt, technically it has emerged as heading the "surplus majority" as it can form government single handedly but for all practical purposes it remains a leading ally of the coalition. Thirdly, on evaluating its performance on the yardsticks of either on seats or vote share one can easily say that India is still passing through the phase of multiparty system. Moreover, unless the BJP secures majority in the council of states/ Rajya Sabha it can't be accorded the status of a "political hegemon." (E.Sridharan, India's Watershed Vote Behind Modi's Victory, Journal of Democracy, October 2014, 25,(4), pp 30-31).

Another critical insight on the issue of whether Indian party system has heralded the era of fourth party system or not is being presented by Schakel, Chanchal Kumar Sharma and Swinden. According to them, no doubt the landslide victory of the BJP in 2014 is a critical development in the realm of party system of Indian politics which certainly is showing a sign of probable change. However it cannot be proclaimed that this has led to a systemic change beyond possibility of reversal as the party system is still passing through a critical phase. As far as one party dominance is concerned it is generally associated with 'over time is much more successful in elections in parliament and the government than any other party'. On this count the BJP cannot qualify as the dominant party. Moreover, they refer and rely on the following criterion of party dominance enunciated by Palshikar to evaluate the status of the BJP as the dominant party: "(1) the inability of any polity-wide party (especially the Congress) to provide a national alternative to the dominant BJP; (2) the possibility of ad hoc anti-BJP coalitions at the state level which lack the nodal stability of the bi-polar nodes in the third or post-Congress party system; (3) the progressive decline in the electoral support of regional and regionalist parties; and (4) the continued centrality of Modi as a strong central leader." Having outlined the criterion for dominance they are of the opinion that at the moment the BJP does not fulfill these conditions particularly, second, third and the fourth. Moreover, limited presence in the southern and eastern regions of the country and continued overall stable performance of state parties except in northern region does add to the understanding that this verdict should not be declared as system defining or beginning of a

new era at least till the general elections in 2019. ( Arjan H.Schakel, Chanchal Kumar Sharma & Wilfried Swenden, *Regional & Federal Studies*, Vol. 29, Issue 3: Second Annual Review of Regional Elections, 2019, pp 329-354).

In the ultimate analysis the researcher has come to the conclusion that the nature of Indian party system within the theoretical framework of coalition politics in general and party system in particular reflect continuity of multi-party system despite path breaking electoral verdict of the 16<sup>th</sup> general elections which may have significant impact on the future course of competitive politics. As of now the federalized bi-nodal competition has not lost its political sheen completely nor has the regional/ state parties lost its political meaning irrespective of severe political jolts received by some of these in the 16<sup>th</sup> general elections. Having said that I must not downplay outright the emergence of a new variant of dominant party system provided the BJP succeeds in expanding its pan India socio-political presence in the post 2014 multi-level political competitions in general and general elections in particular. In other words the Indian party system in the post-Congress era is on the cusp of structural change as the third party system has come under severe stress and strain.

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