UNIT 1  POLITICAL PARTIES, PARTY SYSTEMS AND DEMOCRACY*

Structure
1.0 Objectives
1.1 Introduction
1.2 Meaning of Political Party and Party System
1.3 Evolution of Political Parties and Party System in India
   1.3.1 One-party Dominance System
   1.3.2 Bi-polar and two-party system
   1.3.3 Multi-party and Multi-party System
1.4 Political Parties, Party System and Democracy in India
1.5 Let Us Sum Up
1.6 References
1.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:
- Define party system and political parties;
- Understand main attributes of party system and political parties in India; and
- Explain relation between Political Party, Party System and Democracy.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In a democratic country, institutions play a significant role. Political parties represent such institutions through which people participate in legislative processes by electing parties’ nominees into legislative bodies. They also mobilise people into political activities. Through such activities parties raise concerns of people. Therefore, political parties are essential features of a democratic political system. India has several political parties. In the post-Independence period, India has witnessed transformation from dominance of single party, the Congress in the 1950s-1960s, into multiplication of parties in the later period. The unit discusses the evolution of political parties and party system and relationships of political parties and party systems with democracy in India.

1.2 MEANING OF POLITICAL PARTY AND PARTY SYSTEM

Political Party

Political party forms an important component of a political system. A political party is an institution which consists of leaders, followers, policies and

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Political Parties and Party System

Political parties and party programmes. Its followers may have formal membership of the party or may support it without being formal members. There are different parties. Parties can be differentiated on the bases of leaders, policies and programmes, ideologies and internal functioning. The principal feature of a political party which distinguishes it from other organizations is that its main purpose is to capture power. Unlike a political party, a pressure group, interest group or non-party civil society organization, generally do not seek power. However, sometime such organizations also contest elections. Political parties are the important links between individuals, state and society. Political parties provide the crucial connection between social process and policy-makers, and influence debates and policies on issues affecting the interests of various social groups in a political system.

Party System

The meaning of party system is related to number of political parties in a country. Based on the numbers of parties present in political system, party systems generally can be categorized as single party system, two-party system or multiparty system. As their names suggest, the single party, two-party and multiparty systems denote presence of single, two or several parties in a democracy. The most common way to identify party systems in India generally is the level of performance of parties in elections and their presence in the governments. Presence of more than one party is a feature of a democratic and plural society. Presence of several parties has been an important aspect of party system in India. However, number of party systems changed in India since the 1950s. As you will read section 1.3, the party system which existed during the first decades following Independence was marked by the dominance of the Congress a single party. It was a period of one party dominance but not of the absence of more than one parties. The period of 1950s-1960s was described as an era of single party dominance by Rajni Kothari. During this period the Congress was the single dominant party in India. This period was known as era of Congress dominance. The single party dominance did not mean that there existed only one party in India. What it means was that apart from the Congress there existed several parties such as the Communist Party of India (CPI), different socialist parties, Swatantra Party, Republican Party of India, Jana Sangha, etc., in different states of India. But among these, it was only the Congress Party, which had presence in all states and led governments at the same time at the centre and in most states of India. From the late 1960s, the Congress did not remain a single dominant party. It was defeated by the non-Congress parties in eight states in the assembly elections held in 1967. Since then, apart from Congress, non-Congress parties formed governments in the centre and several states. It signified the presence of multi-party system in India. Two-party system denotes presence of predominantly two parties. In India, two-party system generally prevails in some states. Presence of two-party system does not mean that more than two parties are not present in such states. What it means that among several parties, two parties are most influential. In such system, two parties form governments at different times: one being a ruling party in one government, and opposition in another, and vice-versa. Some scholars such as Sanjay Palshikar and Yogendra Yadav prefer to categorise party systems in terms of poles. Meaning of party system should not be confused with categorization of parties such as national, state/regional or registered. The two are different. The political system, as you have just read is
Political Parties, Party Systems and Democracy

about number of parties, and their performance in elections and participation in
governments. The categorization of parties is done on the basis of their registration
with Election Commission of India. Election commission has categorised three
kinds of political parties in India: National, State/Regional and Registered Parties.
You will read about the categorization of parties in unit 2. At present, India has
almost 2400 political parties of which there are 7 National Parties, 36 state-
recognized parties, 329 regional parties and almost 2044 registered/unrecognized
parties.

1.3 EVOLUTION OF PARTIES AND PARTY
SYSTEM IN INDIA

Political parties in India were born during the Indian national movement. At that
time, they were involved in the Indian national movement. They had also contested
elections to legislative assemblies under restricted adult franchise. After
Independence, the Congress emerged as a dominant party. Indeed, during the
Independence movement the Congress was a movement and it became a party
after Independence. It means that the Congress did not have to be involved in a
movement like national movement, and its main concern was to contest elections
and form government. The party systems in India evolved over a several years
after Independence. However, there did not exist single party system. Instead,
during the 1950s-1960s, the system was marked by the dominance of a single
party, i.e., the Congress, which existed along with other parties. The latter lacked
support and presence across all states of India. Since Independence, India has
seen the presence of three types of party systems: One Party Dominance System,
two-party and bi-polar party System, and multiparty and multi-polar party system.
You can read below the phases of evolution of party system.

1.3.1 One Party Dominance System

For around two decades, the party system in India was dominated by Congress
party. Although several non-Congress parties had existed at that time, it was the
Congress which headed government not only at the centre but in most of the
states. Thus, the non-Congress parties were opposition parties at the centre and
in states, except in Kerala where the CPI was a ruling party for some years in the
late 1950s. Since the Congress was single party having support in most states of
the country, Rajni Kothari conceptualised the party system of this period as an
era of One-party dominance. He even termed the Congress party as ‘Congress
System’. As the leading party, Congress had obtained an absolute majority of
seats in parliament in the first four general elections. Congress party enjoyed
this position till 1967. In 1977 General election, the Janata Party replaced the
Congress at the centre, and in following years it replaced the Congress in several
states as well. By this time, the party system in India, ceased to be dominated by
the single party system.

1.3.2 Bi-polar and Two-party system

India does not have two-party system in ideal sense of the term. Rather, it has bi-
polar political system. In this system, three or more parties come together to
form pre-election or post-election alliance, form a coalition government and/or
adopt a common minimum programme. Such alliances generally occur around
two major parties, which work as competing polls or alliance. As there are two poles of such alliances, the party system in such alliance is called bi-polar party system. This system can exist both at state and national levels. While the principal parties in such alliances generally remain same, their allies can change. Emergence of bi-polar system in India is linked with coalition politics in India. Its first major example was formation of non-Congress SVD governments in eight states in India following Congress’s defeat in 1967 elections. There were two poles in such bi-polar system: On the one hand pole was the Congress party and on the other it was a group of non-Congress parties such as Bhartiya Kranti Dal, the Samyukta Socialist party, Praja Socialist party and Jana Sangh. Its first example at national level was associated with the formation of the Janata Party government following Janata Party’s victory in 1977 Lok Sabha election. At that time, the Congress became an opposition party, and the Janata Party became the ruling party. But these two parties represented two-party system, not the bi-polar system because Janata Party was not a coalition of parties. It was party formed out of merger of five parties – Congress (O), BKD, CFD, Jana Sangha and Swatantra Party. The Congress became its main rival. Thus, Janata Party and the Congress represented two-party system. Such system existed roughly from 1977-1980, till Janata Party ran the central government. However, competing alliances which took place later at the centre and state levels were actually the bi-polar, not two-party systems. Since the 1990s, India has witnessed many coalition governments. Failure of major national parties like the Congress and the BJP to win majority seats in elections brought numerous small parties to the forefront. In 1996, the elections led to the formation of ‘United Front’, a Coalition of as many as 13 political parties. Similarly, in 1999 a coalition party government of ‘National Democratic Alliance (NDA)’ was formed with BJP as the largest member of the coalition. The Governments formed in 1989, 1990, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 were coalitions of several parties. However, from 2004 there is one major party in the coalition government. For example, in 2004 and 2009 it was a coalition government of UPA in which Congress was the leading among other parties in the alliance and in 2014, in NDA government; BJP had supremacy in a coalition of alliance parties. These included the parties led by the BJP in NDA alliance, and those led by the Congress in the UPA alliance with the BJP on the one pole and the Congress/non-Congress parties on the other poles. In states, the bi-polar party systems revolves around the regional parties: for example, in Odisha between the BJD and the Congress; in Jammu and Kashmir until August 5, 2019 when it was a state between the NCP and the PDP, in Kerala between the left and the Congress, etc.

1.3.3 Multi-Party and Multi-Polar Party System

Since 1967 elections, Indian political system has undergone changes. The Congress’s defeat in the elections and split in it weakened the party. This happened with the simultaneous rise of regional parties. It marked the rise of multiple parties in India. Although multiple parties had existed during the era of Congress’s dominance, in comparison to the Congress, they played marginal role in Indian politics. Emergence of multiple parties in several states was result of changes which had occurred in the society. The rise of new issues and regional leaders in different states show such changes. These leaders formed regional political parties. Rise of leaders such as Charan Singh in UP, Rao Virendra Singh in
Haryana, Biju Patnaik in Odisha, Bal Thakre in Maharashtra in the 1960s and 1970s who formed regional parties are some of the early examples marking multiplication of political parties in India. Their number further multiplied in coming decades. The rise of BSP and SP in north India, TMC in West Bengal and BJP in Odisha in the 1980s and 1990s, and several such examples show presence of multiparty system in India. Multiple parties exist at the national as well as local levels. Such parties reflect the social, economic, cultural and political diversity of India. An important aspect of the multiple party system in India is formation of multiple alliances of political parties not only based on policies, programmes and ideologies but also political expediency. Different parties enter alliances in which one party seems to become a nodal party. Such alliances show the existence of multi-polar parties. Multi-party system exists in the form of multi-polar systems.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space below for your answer.

   ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of this unit.

1) Define Political Party and Party System.

2) Briefly explain the evolution of party systems in India

1.4 POLITICAL PARTIES, PARTY SYSTEM AND DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

Political parties and democracy are closely related. This relationship is reflected in various indicators of democracy: people’s participation in decision-making, their political mobilization, generating political consciousness among them, articulation of their issues and providing a vision to meet their needs. Peoples participate in decision-making process of the government through political parties. And political parties do so by fielding candidates in elections. Thus, political parties and the candidates fielded by them become channel through which people participate in decision-making process. These candidates represent people as members of Parliament or the state legislature. Political parties are practical
devices which enable peoples’ participation in decision-making. It is not possible for everybody to directly participate in elections because of large number of population. They do so indirectly by electing candidates in elections who are given tickets by political parties. Apart from the candidates from political parties, people can even elect their representatives the candidates who do not belong to political parties. Such candidates are known as independent candidates. But political parties are more common and effective devises to represent people than the independent candidates. Political parties also play democratic role in mobilizing people into movement. In a democracy, the opposition parties are expected to critique the policies and functioning of the government. Elected members from different parties, along with the independent candidates, participate in the legislative bodies, contribute to strengthening democracy. The policies framed by a government are result of debate among people’s representatives generally fielded by political parties. The parties also contribute to generating democratic consciousness among people. They make people aware of their ideologies and vision about the welfare of the people. Studies show that since the 1990s multiple parties have fielded candidates in elections from various segments of society including marginalised communities such as Dalits, OBCs, women, etc. According to Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar the increasing participation of people in election shows the rise of “plebeians”. Ashutosh Varshney opines that India is becoming more democratic. Similarly, Yogendra Yadav has argued that there has been democratic upsurge in India. These observations are about democratisation through electoral politics. Since political parties are the main players in electoral politics, it can be said that political parties and party systems have strengthened democracy in India. The situation in the past three decades has been different from what that of the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, parties’ contribution to democracy was limited in the sense that the elected leaders generally belonged to the elite sections of the society, and patron-client relationship played a decisive role in mobilization of the voters. Changes in the party systems, their multiplication and rise of parties espousing the cause of Dalits, OBCs, and growth of consciousness among the people have strengthened democracy during the past few decades.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

**Note:**

i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of this unit.

1) Explain the relationship of political parties and political systems with democracy.

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1.5 LET US SUM UP

In democracy, institutions are essential and political processes are important to run institutions, especially representative governments. Political parties are main organs in a party system and promoting democracy. In India, multiparty system represents diversity and plurality. Especially after 1970s, democratization of political parties and enhancement of competitive politics have changed the features of party system in India. Democratization of parties has provided an opportunity to all section of the society to participate in electoral politics through their representatives. It has made country more democratic and participation of the lower and vulnerable section of the society in election has provided new definition of democracy. The democratization of political parties has occurred with emergence of new parties and coalition government in centre.

1.8 REFERENCES


Varshney, Ashutosh (2003), *Battle Half Won: India’s Improbable Democracy*, Penguin/Viking


1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1) A political party is the most important agency through which people participate in political process in a democratic country. It is an organization
Political Parties and Party System

that works as a medium between the people and their representatives to participate in decision-making processes in the legislative bodies. Political parties have features such as organizational structure, leadership, support base or social bases, programmes, ideologies, etc. Party system denotes existence of a number of political parties in a political system. On the basis of their number, party systems can be categorised as single party, two-party or multi-party systems.

2) There are three important phases of evolution of Political Party and Party System in India. First was as categorised by Rajni Kothari as phase of Congress party dominance which existed during 1950-60s. During the phase of Congress party or single party dominance, the opposition parties existed but their support base was limited. The second phase was in the 1970s, when there was emergence of many political parties at regional level. This was outcome of politics of recognition and social and political movement of the backward classes, minorities and ethnic groups. This was also a phase of two-party or bi-polar party system. Third phase is related to emergence of coalition politics as a dominant feature of party systems since the late 1980s. During this phase, multi-party and multi-polar party system became a significant feature of party system in India.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) Political parties and party systems are important agencies that promote democracy. Its positive impact is that it has democratized the party system and encouraged competitive electoral politics that has provided a platform to vulnerable sections of the society to come to forefront. It has promoted politics of recognition. Studies generally agree that party system has empowered the marginalised groups and strengthened democracy. Rising number of political parties indicate a phenomenon in which larger sections find political parties as devise for political recognition. Political parties contribute to strengthening democracy by mobilization of people on their demands and making them politically conscious, by including their issues in programmes and manifestoes, by discussing them in legislatures, etc.