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**Mapping the Phases of India's Party System: From Congress Dominance to
BJP Ascendancy**

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Abstract

Political parties are essential to the functioning of modern democracies, and India is no exception. In a diverse and pluralistic society like India, political parties serve as crucial intermediaries between citizens and the state, providing platforms for political representation and enabling citizens to voice their grievances. The trajectory of India's party system reflects the shifting dynamics of its political landscape, evolving in response to social, economic, and cultural transformations. Political scientists Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton generally divide India's party system into four distinct phases, each characterized by significant changes in political power and party structure, firstly, the era of Congress dominance (1952-1967), where upper-caste leadership prevailed; a period of regional challenges and growing social cleavages (1967-1988); the rise of coalition politics and social justice parties like Janta Dal and BSP (1989-2014); and the return of one-party dominance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014. (Vaishnav&Hinton,2019). The paper is structured into three key sections: the first section will analyse the trajectory of India's party system, focusing on significant changes and political realignments over time. The second section will focus on analyzing the rise of the second dominant party system in India, examining how Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) have navigated the changing political and social landscape. The third section will critically examine the broader effects of this shifting party system on Indian politics, considering its influence on democracy, governance, and the representation of diverse social groups.

Keywords: Indian party system, Political realignments, Coalition politics, BSP, BJP, Social cleavages, Political representation.

Evolution of India's Party System: The Era of Congress Dominance (1952–1967)

The evolution of India's party system is rooted in the independence movement, where the Indian National Congress (INC), founded in 1885, shifted from seeking autonomy within British rule to spearheading the fight for complete independence. Led by figures like Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel, the Congress united diverse social and regional groups, emerging as the primary force against colonial rule. Its dominance in shaping India's early political framework after 1947 highlights its foundational role in the country's political evolution. This period is considered the first phase of India's party system, commonly referred to by political scientists as "India's first party system" (Jha, 1993). And in *Politics in India*, Rajani Kothari describes this as the phase of "one-party dominance," where Congress maintained a competitive edge despite opposition. Kothari viewed Congress as both a "party of consensus" and a "party of pressure," adept at managing internal factionalism while uniting diverse social groups, including upper castes, Dalits, Adivasis, peasants, and women. He argued

that the "Congress system" was more than just a political party—it was a movement central to India's independence struggle, representing a broader national agenda. Congress's ability to balance political agitation, mediate internal conflicts, and use patronage solidified its long-lasting dominance. Kothari's "catch-all model" highlighted the party's strategic flexibility and capacity to address a wide range of social and regional interests, ensuring its continued control in post-independence India.

Myron Weiner, in *Party Building in a New Nation*, argued that the Congress Party represented an open elite system, allowing marginalized leaders to rise through factional support, exemplified by figures like Devraj Urs and K. Kamaraj. However, by the 1960s, regional movements, economic discontent, and social unrest began to erode Congress's dominance, culminating in its poor performance in the 1967 elections. This decline was further fuelled by internal factionalism, which, while initially strengthening Congress, ultimately led to its fragmentation. Scholars like Paul Brass emphasized that Congress's system of patronage and internal checks, once a

source of strength, contributed to its weakening as social and regional tensions grew. Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar in this work *Party system and electoral politics in the Indian states, 1952- 2002: From Hegemony to convergence* also argued that after Nehru's death, the historical consensus he embodied broke down, and social cleavages such as caste, religion, and region gained electoral prominence. This shift led to the rise of regional parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Janata Dal, signalling the end of Congress's dominance and the transition to a multi-party system. This transformation reshaped India's political landscape, marking the decline of one-party rule and the rise of a more fragmented political system.

Political Shifts and Realignments:

India's Second Party System (1967–1989)

Following the decline of Congress's dominance in India, the political landscape began to shift. It marked as the second phase of party system in India also termed as India's Second party system (Jha,1993) and saw the emergence of new ideological forces and the resurgence of caste-based politics, which altered the traditional power dynamics within the country. regional identity politics and growing social

cleavages occurred and Hindutva, a form of Hindu nationalism, found an influential foothold as Congress's hegemony weakened. Hindutva leaders like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Deen Dayal Upadhyay promoted a vision of Indian society as organic and cohesive, arguing that caste discrimination was a product of British colonialism rather than an inherent feature of Indian culture. By invoking an idealized past of caste harmony, Hindutva ideologues reinforced upper-caste dominance while broadening their appeal across diverse social groups.

In his seminal work *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of Lower Castes in North Indian Politics*, Christophe Jaffrelot highlights how this narrative positioned Hindutva as a unifying force, creating a framework that connected caste and religion in ways that resonated politically. This period of realignment was marked not only by the influence of Hindutva but also by the rise in caste consciousness, particularly among the lower castes in North India and led to rise of "*Silent Revolution*". And According to Yogendra Yadav, the 1960s marked the emergence of what he refers to as the "*First Democratic Upsurge*". As Congress's influence waned, many lower-caste groups, marginalized under previous power structures, found new political agency, expressing it through emerging political parties and regional

movements. This led to a redefinition of power that was no longer solely dictated by traditional upper-caste elites. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the precursor to the BJP, began as a party rooted in urban areas of the Hindi heartland, particularly Uttar Pradesh, supported by ex-zamindars, upper-caste professionals, and business elites. Initially labelled a "Brahmin-Bania Party," it broadened its appeal by connecting with caste and cultural identities. This shift helped the BJS significantly increase its vote share in states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Delhi from 1952 to 1967.

A key turning point in Indian politics occurred with Indira Gandhi's imposition of the Emergency on June 25, 1975, which led to political suppression and civil liberties restrictions. In response to this, opposition parties, led by Jayaprakash Narayan, united to challenge Congress's authoritarian rule, forming the Janata Party in 1977. This coalition, comprising Congress (O), the Jana Sangh, Bhartiya Lok Dal, and socialist groups, was united in its opposition to Emergency policies. In the 1977 Lok Sabha elections, the Janata Party defeated Congress, securing 271 seats (41.25% of the vote) to Congress's 154 seats (34.54%). The Jana Sangh, as the largest faction, won 93 seats, marking a historic shift in Indian politics. (Yadav & Patnaik, 2022) however, despite

its influence, only three of its members—Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal Krishna Advani, and Satish Chandra Agarwal—received ministerial positions in Morarji Desai's government. The Janata Party experiment quickly unravelled, with internal divisions emerging within two years. Key leaders like Chaudhary Charan Singh, Raj Narain, and George Fernandes criticized the Jana Sangh's dual membership with the RSS, leading to 1980 resolution barring RSS members from the Janata Party. This split resulted in the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on April 6, 1980, which adopted a moderate approach and initially downplayed caste issues. As Congress's dominance waned, new political players and ideologies emerged, with Hindutva gaining traction in a more open political climate and caste-based politics rising as marginalized groups sought representation. Vivek Kumar, in *India's Roaring Revolution: Dalit Assertion and New Horizons*, argues that labelling the Dalit-Bahujan political shift of the 1980s as a "Silent Revolution" is overly simplistic. The rise of parties like the BSP provided a powerful, independent platform for the marginalized to assert their political rights and gain access to political power, marking a significant shift in Indian politics. It redefined Indian politics, creating a more fragmented, pluralistic system focused on cultural and social identities.

The Emergence of the Third-Party System (1989-2014): The Rise of Coalition Politics

By 1989, Congress's dominance, which had weakened over the 1960s and 1970s, completely ended, marking the beginning of coalition governance also known as "Third party system". The shift from a Congress-centred polity to a multipolar political landscape was driven by three powerful forces often referred to as 'Mandal, masjid, and market' which disrupted the political order and triggered a realignment in Indian politics. (Vaishnav&Hinton,2019). Between 1989 and 2009, Indian politics was characterized by the absence of a central political force, leading to a period of fragmentation. With no party securing a majority, coalition governments became the norm. This era saw a more federalized political system, the rise of OBCs in politics, and increased caste-based mobilization. Bruce Graham in article the *origin of the BJP* argued when the BJP was founded, it initially downplayed caste issues, but the 1990 implementation of the Mandal Commission report forced the party to address caste politics. Guided by K. N. Govindacharya, the BJP engaged in indirect Mandalization and formed alliances with backward caste parties like the Samata Party. Despite promoting

leaders such as Kalyan Singh and Uma Bharti, the party's upper-caste leadership often undermined their rise, with Kalyan Singh resigning and being expelled after asserting his backward caste leadership, and Uma Bharti being removed in 2003. This highlighted the limits of caste-based mobilization within the BJP. In the post Mandal Phase, which Yogendra Yadav also termed as '*Third electoral system*' of India and one marked by post congress polity. Congress could not maintain its coalition of extremes because of the emergence of social Justice Parties like SP, BSP, RJD etc. were aggressively mobilizing the Dalit and backwards on caste lines. The response of the Congress to these challenges has been uneven. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Congress, dominated by upper-caste leadership, became politically irrelevant, securing only residual votes left by other parties, as noted by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar. In contrast, in states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, Congress successfully integrated Dalit-Bahujan leaders, maintaining political relevance and countering the rise of the BJP. CSDS data also shows that in these states, where the contest is largely between Congress and BJP, Congress has positioned itself as a party representing subaltern interests.

From Multipolarity to Unipolarity: BJP and the Rise of India's Fourth Party System (2014-Present)

In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won 282 seats, securing India's first single-party majority since 1984. With allies, the NDA's total vote share reached 38.5%, while Congress dropped to just 44 seats, its worst performance since independence. Despite winning only 31% of the vote, the BJP's result marked a historic shift in Indian politics. This marked the emergence of India's fourth party system, with the return of one-party dominance through the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma referred to as the rise of the 'second dominant party system in India'. The BJP in 2014 and 2019 general election surpassed its competitors, expanding its influence into new regions and garnering support from a wide segment of Hindu society. The dominance of the BJP can be attributed to several factors, as discussed by scholars such as Milan Vaishnav and Pradeep Chhibber. Verma in his work *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* argues that the success of BJP's is not only due to short-term factors like Narendra Modi's popularity, organizational strength, and national security concerns, but also stems from long-term ideological consolidation which has successfully garnered the support of

marginalized groups and women. Over the past two decades, the BJP has effectively owned the national security narrative, aligning it with its ideological goals. Additionally, its strategic use of social media and direct welfare delivery has reshaped Indian politics, shifted the middle ground and solidified the party's connection with the electorate.

Devesh Kapur argues that under Modi, India shifted from Nehruvian ideals to a nationalism rooted in Hindu identity, emphasizing cultural distinctiveness and national interests. Modi distanced himself from traditional elites, breaking from entrenched power structures. The BJP under Modi adopted a pro-business stance, contrasting with Congress-era policy paralysis. While not a radical reformer, Modi promoted Indian businesses as integral to India's global standing, exemplified by improving India's Ease of Doing Business ranking from 134 to 77 during his first term. And Through initiatives like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Ujjwala Yojna, PM Awas, Ayushman Bharat, and Jan Dhan, the BJP has effectively attracted voters, particularly from marginalized groups and women. In his work *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party*, Nalin Mehta argues that the BJP's electoral success lies not just in promoting Hindu nationalism, but in its

organizational strength at the grassroots level and its direct welfare initiatives. Mehta highlights the BJP's strategic exploitation of social justice fault lines by incorporating backward and Dalit communities into its fold.

The BJP's success in the Hindi heartland stems from its growing support among backward castes and Dalits, alongside its traditional upper-caste base. Post-2014, the party's appeal has expanded to communities like Maurya and Nishad, mobilized through a narrative of 'aatma gaurav' (self-pride), which redefines caste pride within the framework of Hindutva. By invoking mythical figures like Suhaldev, the BJP shifts focus from caste marginalization to an aspirational identity, erasing victimhood and promoting unity through Hindu nationalism. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma argue that a 'profound ideological shift' and a growing consensus around 'ethno-political majoritarianism,' distinct from religious nationalism, have driven the increasing support for the BJP among 'new voters,' including Dalits, in 2019. However, their study does not examine whether this Dalit support is confined to the electoral domain or has permeated their social consciousness. Which needs further investigation. However, despite these mobilization tactics, the BJP's politics of social engineering faces some limitations.

Particularly in its failure to integrate marginalized communities into leadership roles. Despite mobilizing backward and Dalit castes, most key cabinet positions under BJP for example in Uttar Pradesh, which is generally seen as the emerging bastion of Hindutva politics under Yogi Adityanath are held by upper-caste MLAs. Achin Vanaik in his work *the communalization of India's polity* argues that the RSS restricts BJP's political pragmatism, maintaining a paternalistic stance toward lower castes. Suhas Palshikar describes this shift under Modi as a move toward majoritarian hegemony, combining Hindu nationalism with welfarism and gaining attentions to the marginalised.

Critical Evaluation and Analysis:

The BJP's current political dominance in India can be traced to its effective consolidation of Hindu nationalist sentiments, the implementation of strategic welfare policies, and a robust organizational structure. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the party has reshaped the approach to electoral success by merging cultural identity with development, a strategy that has particularly resonated with voters in the Hindi heartland. In *Jugalbandi: The BJP Before Modi*, Vinay Sitapati argues that the BJP's embrace of Hindu nationalism arose

from a grassroots demand. He also notes that in its early days, under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the BJP initially aimed to follow Gandhian socialism. But later focused again on the idea of Hindutva. A critical question arises: How has the BJP managed to capture the votes of marginalized communities, particularly when its ideological affiliations have sometimes been seen as exclusionary? One answer lies in the party's strategic focus on exploiting regional and caste-based divisions, especially in key states like Uttar Pradesh. The BJP capitalized on the perception that the BSP and SP primarily represented the interests of Jatav (SC) and Yadav (OBC) communities, respectively. This strategy, refined in the 2014, 2017, and 2019 elections, targeted non-Jatav SC and non-Yadav OBC voters. In the 2019 elections, while the BSP-SP alliance secured strong support from Yadavs, Jatavs, and Muslims, the BJP gained overwhelming backing from other OBC groups, including 80% of Kurmis and Koeris, and 48% of non-Jatav Dalits. This shift occurred despite the BJP's associations with anti-Dalit incidents. To bolster his first-term record and counter criticism, Modi launched numerous social welfare schemes between 2014 and 2019, focusing on rural infrastructure and services like roads, toilets, and cooking gas connections. While these initiatives did not

replace the need for income growth, they showcased the government's capacity for positive change. By linking these programs directly to the central government and himself, Modi fostered widespread goodwill, even among households that only partially benefited. This reinforced his image as a leader steering a traditionally corrupt and indifferent state toward genuine progress.

Modi ji also positioned himself as a staunch anti-corruption reformer, exemplified by his bold but controversial 2016 demonetization, which invalidated 86% of India's currency to combat black money. Although the policy failed to achieve its economic objectives and caused significant disruption, Modi skilfully leveraged it to craft a political narrative portraying himself as a crusader against corrupt elites. His rhetoric and message management transformed a policy misstep into a symbol of his commitment to clean governance and resonated with widespread anti-elite sentiment. All of this, in various ways, enables the BJP to capture the vote share of new voters, even without offering them meaningful representation or substantial empowerment.

Conclusion:

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) within the framework of

India's Fourth Party System has had profound implications for the country's democracy and governance. As a central player in the political realignment, the BJP's ascent has reshaped the party system, consolidating Hindu political identity. Its emphasis on Hindutva has also brought to the forefront issues of identity, caste, and religion, often polarizing public discourse and challenging the inclusive nature of India's democratic fabric. While the BJP has successfully harnessed support from a broad coalition of caste and religious groups, its dominance has at times sidelined marginalized communities, raising concerns about the representation of all social groups in the political process. In terms of democracy, the BJP's emphasis on Hindutva and its alignment with certain caste and religious identities have sparked debates about the inclusivity of India's political system. While it has mobilized previously underrepresented groups, such as the backward and lower castes, it has also contributed to the polarization of society along caste and religious lines while giving most leadership in the hands of the upper castes. This has raised concerns about the erosion of pluralism and secularism, core principles of India's democratic ethos. Governance under the BJP has been characterized by strong

central leadership, particularly under Narendra Modi, which has led to significant policy reforms. However, this centralization has also raised questions about the concentration of power and its effects on democratic institutions. Overall, the rise of the BJP reflects the evolving dynamics of India's democracy, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges of governance in a more fragmented political landscape.

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