

**The Changing Nature of the Indian Party System:  
'Congress System' to 'BJP Dominance'**

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**Abstract**

In the last 75 years, the Indian political system has gone through various changes and transition phases, the clear impact of which can be seen in the Indian party system. The existence of the Congress as an important national party after independence, both at the national and state levels, in what Rajni Kothari termed the 'Congress System' (1952-1967). Morris-Jones described the 1950–1967 phase in similar terms as "coexistence with competition but without a trace of alternative". 1977 marked the beginning of the end of the 'Congress system' by Rajni Kothari, which had been facing challenges since 1967, when Congress lost power in eight states for the first time. The main reasons behind this were the rise of opposition and regional parties, allegations of corruption and scams, preference for seniority and dynasty over talent, the dominance of the Nehru-Gandhi family, failure to attract youth and the Modi wave etc. Along with this, various parties and regional parties started emerging in the opposition, which changed the Indian party system towards a multi-party system. In this form, BJP emerged as an important national party, which completely changed the party system after winning the national elections in 2014 and 2019. Some thinkers argue that 2014 marks the beginning of India's fourth party system—the first three-party system in the Congress system (1950–77), the second transitional phase (1977–89) when the dominance of the Congress was challenged, Third, the emergence and new phase of a bipolar party system in the 1990s. Can we compare BJP dominance with the 'Congress System'? What are the similarities and dissimilarities in this? What are the reasons behind the decline of 'Congress System'? All these questions will be discussed in detail.

**Keywords-** *Parties, Elections, Party System, Democracy, Congress System and BJP dominance*

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## Introduction

Political parties are the pillars of every modern democracy, and parties inspire democracy to be responsible. The party system in any democracy is a way of interaction and competition between different parties. The Indian party system is unique in that it does not fit into any type of classification. The nature of politics as well as the nature of the relationship between the state and society has changed significantly in the last two decades, significantly politicising a greater number of people, which explains the change in the nature of the party system.

The dominance of the Congress party after independence was defined by 'Rajni Kothari' as 'Congress system' and 'Morris Jones' as 'Congress dominance system'. The Indian National Congress was a very influential and powerful political party, it established its strong position in the Legislative Assembly and the Parliament. But with time, there have been many changes in the Indian party system. These changes started from 1967 but most of these changes happened between 1980 and 1990. During this time the multi-party system replaced the one-party system, multi-party system can also be considered a federal party system or coalition party system. Since 2014, the 'Bharatiya Janata Party' has emerged as the dominant party in India, being seen by many thinkers as an alternative to the 'Congress system'. In this article the meaning, rise and fall of the Congress system, meaning of the 'BJP system', difference between the Congress system and BJP system will be studied.

## Congress System: Rise and Fall

The study of party systems has so far focused on two contrasting phenomena, the two-party or multi-party system on the one hand, and the "one-party system" on the other. The Indian party system can be described as a one-party dominance system, which is very different from the single-party system. From the first general election in 1952 until the sixth general election in March 1977, the Congress, on the basis of its leadership depth and organisational ability, ruled the centre and most of the Indian states continuously. The dominance of Congress by 'Rajni Kothari' from 1952-1967 was named as 'Congress System'. (Kothari, 1964) It was a competitive party system, which included both a 'party of consent' and a 'party of pressure'. The Congress Party has been a party working on the principle of 'pressure' and 'consensus', in which its various organisations and leaders press for their demands, which are decided unanimously by its National Working Committee.

According to political scientists 'Lloyd Rudolph' and 'Susan Rudolph', the Congress party took a middle path while building a consensus. Due to the quality of taking decisions with 'pressure' and 'consensus', Congress played the role of both India's main party and opposition for three decades after independence. Morris-Jones described the 1950–1967 phase in similar terms as "coexistence with competition but without a trace of alternative". But gradually this supremacy began to be challenged as the Congress began to lose its legacy as the national party of the freedom struggle. Congress faced a leadership crisis after the death of Prime Minister 'Jawaharlal Nehru' and Prime Minister 'Lal Bahadur Shastri'. A rift had developed between the senior members of the Congress organisation known as the Syndicate, and the Youth Congress leaders, over the election of a new Prime Minister after the death of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri'. Syndicate leaders wanted to make Indira Gandhi, the daughter of

Prime Minister 'Jawaharlal Nehru', the new Prime Minister while the youth was in support of 'Morarji Desai'.

After the election of Indira Gandhi as the new Prime Minister, the disputes within the party came to the fore more openly, who can be seen as a presidential candidate. With this, the Congress split into Congress (R) and Congress (I) in 1969. Indira Gandhi began a tradition of appointing Gandhi-Nehru family loyalists to the party's National Executive Committee, leaving no room for leaders who disagreed with the policies of the Gandhi-Nehru family. Because of this, gradually one by one the regional leaders left the Congress and formed their own regional parties like TMS, NCP, YSR Congress, Telangana Rashtra Samithi, Biju Janata Dal and countless smaller parties. As a result of this there was a rapid rise of regional parties in the politics of India and the Congress kept getting away from power election after election.

Rajni Kothari revisited the 'Congress system' in 1974 and proposed that the system still worked, albeit in some areas, because it still had the characteristics of consensus and pressure. 1977 marked the beginning of the end of the 'Congress system' described by Rajni Kothari, which had been facing challenges since 1967 when Congress lost power in eight states for the first time. However, he admitted that after 1967 the dominance of the Congress had "diminished to a great extent".

In 1967 Congress started getting challenges at state level and national level, Congress got first challenge and with that Congress completely lost its supremacy. This model of the Congress party lasted for three decades, but this phase came to an end as soon as Prime Minister 'Indira Gandhi' took charge of the party. 'Rudolph and Rudolph' show that the Congress won a landslide victory in the 1980 Lok Sabha elections under the leadership of 'Indira Gandhi', but the era of unilateral supremacy of the Congress was over.

The rise of coalition politics in 1989 brought an end to the Congress system. But it is difficult to imagine Indian politics without the Congress, which remains an important political force. After the assassination of Prime Minister 'Rajiv Gandhi' there was a political vacuum in the party, but at the centre 'P.V. Narasimha Rao' became the Prime Minister and in 1997-98 the Congress also supported the United Front government. The arrival of Mrs. 'Sonia Gandhi' and 'Rahul Gandhi' changed the face of the Congress and made up for the damage done to the party after the death of 'Rajiv Gandhi'. The party led the UPA coalition government at the Center in 2004 and again in 2009, winning 206 seats. But could not save himself for long and lost in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The party lost about 88 percent (369) of the 421 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. (Rampal and Sharma, 2022)

### **Reasons Behind the Decline of 'Congress System'**

The Modi wave can be seen as the main reason for the disintegration of the 'Congress system', but even before the Modi wave, Congress had started losing its supremacy at many state and central levels, the main reason being the weakness of the organisational structure of the Congress. Several reasons were responsible for the disintegration of the Congress system in India, which are described as follows-

**Rise of Opposition and Regional Parties:-** Due to the absence of strong opposition till the time of Prime Minister 'Jawaharlal Nehru' and Prime Minister 'Lal Bahadur Shastri', the Congress party was able to maintain its supremacy. But after his death, when 'Indira Gandhi' came to the fore as the Prime Minister, her differences with the old leaders of the party started emerging. Due to disagreement on many things, many leaders left the Congress party and new parties were formed, due to which gradually the Congress party became weak and the regional and opposition parties became stronger. Which started the rise of the coalition government at the state as well as at the central level.

**Preference to Seniority and Dynasty over Talent:-** Congress has always preferred seniority and dynasty over talent. Example: Selection of 'Ashok Gehlot' over 'Sachin Pilot' and 'Jyotiraditya Scindia' as Chief Minister of Rajasthan and 'Kamal Nath' as Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. On the contrary, 'Narendra Modi' has appointed new and young leaders like 'Devendra Fadnavis', 'Yogi Adityanath', 'Manohar Lal Khattar', 'Sarbanand Sonowal', 'Jairam Thakur' and 'Biplab Kumar Deb' as Chief Ministers. Rahul Gandhi made 'Ashok Gehlot' the Chief Minister of Rajasthan. Opposing this, he said that he was pressured by the senior leaders of the organisation to make Gehlot the Chief Minister, while he wanted to make the young 'Sachin Pilot' the Chief Minister. (Kumar, 2016)

**Domination of the Nehru-Gandhi Family:-** The Congress has become a Nehru-Gandhi entanglement over the past few decades. A leader from outside the family cannot be seen as leading the party. It is possible that in place of 'Rahul Gandhi', leaders like 'A.K. Antony' or 'Ashok Gehlot' can be elected as the party president. 'Sonia Gandhi' never trusted a capable person like 'Pranab Mukherjee'. Due to this Congress has also faced the crisis of good political leadership.

**Allegations of Corruption and Scams:-** The UPA tenure was characterised by corruption and scams. The coal scam, the Commonwealth Games scam and the 3G spectrum scam created disillusionment among the general public who wanted clean and transparent governance. Rising inflation and unemployment, economic slowdown and policy paralysis contributed to a great extent affecting the image of the Congress and its allies in the eyes of the public.

**Behind the new age politics:-** Congress is still stuck in the politics of caste mobilisation and religious appeasement of the Mandal era. To win elections, Congress depends more on a loyal vote bank than on administrative performance. While the BJP government created attractive policies for all classes.

**Modi Wave:-** Powerful leaders like Prime Minister 'Narendra Modi' attracted a lot of people not only in the Indian public but also at the international level. Today everyone at the national and international level sees only 'Narendra Modi' as the personality of a leader. The Modi wave became the main reason for the failure of Congress.

**Fails to Attract Youth:-** 65% of India's population is below 35 years of age, which is 50% of India's electorate. 'Rahul Gandhi' being a young leader (though he is 51) was expected to strike a good chord with the youth by the Congress party and friendly ecosystem and put them on their feet with his humility. But the irony is that 67-year-old Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the one to win over the

youth. Modi attracted a long-term vision, especially the youth, through programs such as "Clean India", "Make in India" and 'skill development'.

**Electoral System :-** In India's 'first-past-the-post' system, representation or seats are not given in proportion to the votes polled in elections. Thus, even in the years of Congress dominance, from 1952 to 1967, when Congress had more than 70 percent of the seats in Parliament, Congress never got more than 50 percent of the votes in Parliament or the State Legislature as a whole. (Rudolph & Rudolph,1987) The dominance of the Congress in elections, like the decline of the Congress, has been amplified by the unequal results of the 'first-past-the-post' electoral system.

According to 'Sanjay Kumar', co-director of Lokniti at the Delhi-based Center for the Study of Developing Societies, there is no single factor underlying the defeat of the Congress. He told that "Sometimes, it is demography, sometimes it is strong local rivalries. The rise of regional parties can also be attributed as one of the important factors behind the decline of the Congress".

The downfall of the Congress means the downfall of a balanced political system in India. Congress and BJP, the two most prominent forces, used to balance each other in Indian politics. With this balance lost, the earlier Congress system is being replaced by a new emerging "BJP system". (Jha, 2017)

### **The Decline of 'Congress System' and Rise of 'BJP Dominance'**

The Indian National Congress has been the most important institution in the modern political development of India. Today the Congress is in the final stages of decline, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is on its way to becoming the best party in the nation, winning a majority in the last parliamentary elections and several important state assembly elections, BJP is a major political party in India. The BJP supports Hindu nationalism, self-sufficient and free-market economy. A few months after the death of Prime Minister 'Jawaharlal Nehru' in 1964, political scientist 'Rajni Kothari' published a seminal article titled "The Congress System in India". In it, he argued that India's political system was characterized by "one-party dominance". This old Congress system, which lasted roughly from 'Nehru' to 'Narasimha Rao', collapsed after 50 years of independence.

The landslide victory of the BJP in two consecutive Lok Sabha elections has ushered India into a new era. Some observers describe this emerging pattern of competition as the second phase of single-party dominance, the first phase referring to the period of Congress's dominance over national and state politics in the 1950s and 1960s. After two decades of transition, it has now been replaced by the 'new BJP dominance'. The BJP is emerging as the new BJP system due to the declining vote share of Congress, which had taken deep roots by the 75th year of independence. In the Indian context, the BJP has sought to centralize political power in its national unit through the charismatic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This dominance, created under Prime Minister 'Narendra Modi' in 2014, follows two decades of political churning and experimentation in Indian politics. Political battles will now be for or against the BJP, as they were once against the Congress.

Since the 1990s, the BJP's vote share has been consistently above 20 percent and crossed the 30 percent mark for the first time in the 2014 elections. Looking at BJP's social coalition and Hindutva

consensus among the masses, it seems that by 2047, there will be a fifth wave of BJP victory in states as diverse as Telangana, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Hindutva, once the primary barrier to the BJP's expansion during the days of Congress dominance, has now become its main base for mass mobilization. At the same time, Congress is facing the crisis of ideology, through which it can mobilize the public. Between 2014-19, the BJP grew fivefold; by 2019, the BJP had 174 million members, almost 29 times the estimated size of the RSS. (Mehta, 2022) As in the old Congress system, the lack of a coherent national opposition helps the BJP. The real opposition is now at the regional level, a truly new national opposition may emerge after 'Narendra Modi'. For example, the AAP may eventually replace Congress as the more effective opposition force.

### **Difference between 'Congress System' and 'BJP Dominance'**

In the last 75 years, the Indian political system has gone through various changes and transitions, the visible impact of which can be seen in the Indian party system. The Congress system that existed from 1952-1967 was challenged at the state level in 1967 and at the national level in 1977, the rise of opposition and regional parties challenged the supremacy of the Congress and gave birth to the rise of BJP supremacy. Is BJP also a 'party of consent' or an umbrella party? Has it been able to garner support from all sections of society? Will the opposition parties be able to challenge this new hegemony in the role of a 'pressure force'? And will the BJP be as adept at such pressures as the Congress was immediately after independence? Is BJP ushering in a different kind of dominance in its system - what we can call the 'BJP System'? Can the quality of this dominance be compared to the Congress of yesteryear?

The new BJP system has succeeded in establishing its roots after a long effort. This system, which took shape during the tenure of Prime Minister 'Narendra Modi' in 2014, has moved forward following two decades of political churning and experimentation in Indian politics. In 2019 BJP managed to divert attention from development, education, employment, poverty alleviation and the economy to more emotive issues such as national security, Jammu and Kashmir, Ram Mandir and Hindutva and made the election a referendum on Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Prime Minister 'Modi' and BJP's success in the election can be attributed to the issue of Ram Mandir, J&K, Hindutva, popular welfare schemes, India's strong response to Pakistan, and a strong multi-pronged media campaign. (Maorano and Sen, 2020) Meanwhile, the Indian National Congress (INC) won only 52 seats in the 2019 general election, eight more than in 2014.

In the first six months of his second term, Prime Minister Narendra Modi harnessed a strong mandate to push a political and social agenda inspired by Hindu nationalism. The BJP fulfilled several long-standing promises of the Hindu nationalist movement, such as the abolition of Article 370, the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and the passage of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019. Conjectures are rife about whether the dominance of the BJP is similar to that of the Congress. While 'Pratap Bhanu Mehta' argues that "the BJP won despite economic setbacks, and ushered in a new kind of political common sense about democratic values". (Mehta, 2019) 'Suhas Palshikar' Proposes that the party's "supply and demand" style has created a politics based on insecurity among voters and dreams of majority dominance. (Palshikar, 2019) 'Pradeep Chhibber' and 'Rahul Verma' stress the demographic change and "structural change" resulting from

urbanization and India's growing middle class, which strengthens the BJP's appeal in society. (Chhibber and Verma, 2019, p.131).

The dominance of the BJP is very different from the 'consensus model' of the Congress, in contrast to the 'Congress system' where the BJP has been able to establish its dominance by making identity politics and Hindu nationalism the cornerstones of the government's agenda. Thus, none of the opposition parties has effectively challenged the BJP's narrative regarding the abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. (Sen, 2019) This has, paradoxically, created a new 'consensus' in the party system regarding the relationship between the majority and minority communities. Most of the political parties have started adopting policies and language that are not different from those of the BJP.

Shri 'Narendra Modi's' BJP was quite different from 'Jawaharlal Nehru's' Congress even internally. The Congress functioned as a sophisticated patronage machine regulated by internal democratic elections, while the BJP, dominated by Prime Minister 'Narendra Modi' and Home Minister 'Amit Shah', wielded virtually monopoly power over party appointments. In this sense, the role of the opposition parties in the BJP is very different from the pressure parties of the 'Kothari'. 'Samuel Huntington' sees this as a clear sign of the impending 'political decline' of the BJP as a functioning institution. Another difference between the BJP and the Congress system is the role of the RSS, which is not only the intellectual mentor of the BJP but also plays an important role during elections. Many BJP members of parliament and ministers are members of the RSS and the influence of the RSS is felt in government policy, such as the 'Atmanirbhar' or self-reliance campaign. (Pandey & Arnimesh, 2020) However, there is a need to reconsider the RSS-BJP relationship at a time when the BJP The reach has increased tremendously and the party is led by a popular and charismatic leader like 'Narendra Modi'.

The second issue is whether the BJP is electorally effective or not. The major factors as to why the BJP has been able to assert itself electorally have been the 'Modi effect', the BJP's efficient use of the media, invocation of nationalism and national security, organizational advantages and welfare policies. All these factors have been important for the party to win with a large majority in 2014 and again in 2019. Modi's BJP, however, is dominated by a possibly more fragmented party system than the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s. The party won 282 seats in the 2014 election, which increased to 303 in 2019. Its vote share percentage has also improved.

In Adam Ziegfeld's study "A new dominant party in India?", he lists three qualities the BJP would need to be considered dominant—size, a deep and broad base of support, and competition with an opposition. (Ziegfeld, 2020,p.136) Ziegfeld argues that the BJP does indeed have some strengths, such as a relatively strong support base in its strongholds, a popular leader, a successful campaign machine, and a new ideological consensus that has garnered support, but with many problems and challenges. The role of the opposition is challenging the BJP. Additionally, he underlines how the electoral footprint of the BJP is not as large as that of the Congress at its peak. Although the BJP has significant penetration in East and Northeast India, it has limited representation in South India (it won no seats in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh and only one seat in Tamil Nadu in 2019), while in states such as Bihar and Maharashtra, the BJP has depended on alliances to win. (Ziegfeld, 2020,p.150) At the state level, the BJP's dominance appears to be even more shaky. For example, there are signs that some consolidation of the opposition is taking place in several states. Given the BJP's margin of victory in the general election,

the party was expected to score a good victory in the Haryana and Maharashtra state elections held immediately after the 2019 general election. (Maiorano, 2019) However, it managed to obtain only a relative majority (36.5 percent vote share) in Haryana, where it formed a coalition government. It also lost a significant portion of its majority in Maharashtra (44.5 percent), where it was unable to form a government. Additionally, there has been variation in voter behavior at the national and state levels, presenting a contrast. (Maiorano, 2020) In the assembly elections of states like Delhi, BJP has got less success on issues like Hindutva, implementation of CAA, Ram Mandir. In the 2020 Delhi Assembly elections, the Aam Aadmi Party contested and won the elections on the report card of good governance and local issues like education, health, electricity, water. This suggests that hegemony has been different and complex between state and national elections.

The promotion of an explicitly majoritarian discourse is indeed a key element of the BJP system and a significant difference from the Congress. 'Christophe Jaffrelot' argues that India is an ethnic democracy, where minorities are politically silent and irrelevant. Only eight percent of Muslims voted for the BJP in the 2019 elections, allowing the party to effectively ignore them. The BJP has expanded not only numerically, but also geographically, especially in India's east and northeast, and socially, especially among lower classes and castes who traditionally vote for other parties. BJP is now attracting voters from most sections of society and caste groups, both in urban and rural areas, with the exception of religious minorities. 'Chhibber and Verma' argue that this "mobilization capability" signals the rise of the BJP as a major party. Both the Congress and the BJP have been successful in building a consensus on their issues among the opposition, with the Congress benefiting from the legacy of the freedom struggle, while the BJP successfully implemented its schemes based on nationalism and welfare policy.

Presumably, the dominance of the BJP over Indian politics has evolved over a long period of time which has been the main feature of Rajni Kothari's 'Congress system' which applies to the BJP system as well. Prime Minister 'Jawaharlal Nehru' ruled on the basis of the ideals of pluralism, legitimacy and democracy and tried to resolve differences on the basis of discussion and consensus. Whereas many steps taken by the BJP again have brought down the quality of India's democracy, whether it is about raising money and campaigning in elections or the system of limiting the opposition in the government and making policies according to their wishes. BJP adopted authoritarian rule by majority and minority politics, bypassing India's democratic and secular values.

Is there any 'BJP System' in Indian Politics? However, if the term 'BJP system' is used in a loose sense to describe single-party BJP dominance, it applies to the current state of India's politics. But the dominance of the BJP is not equal to that of the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s, mainly for four reasons – first, the BJP has been ideologically opposed to the ideology of the Congress system, and has been substantially less flexible towards minority groups. Second, there are strong regional parties at the state level, which means that the BJP lost elections in several states after coming to power at the Center in 2014. Third, the role of Congress as a national alternative cannot be denied. Fourth, For Kothari, the Congress system was characterized as a consensus party, where decisions were taken through consensus and deliberation, a conspicuous absence of this in the BJP. The main reason for BJP's dominance and the majority is the face of Narendra Modi, in the future no other new face of BJP is seen emerging who can take his place.



**Conclusion**

A brief assessment of the causes and depth of the Congress's decline reveals that the Indian party system is neither in a systemic crisis of governance nor under threat from religious revivalism. The Indian party system is in the process of transition from a single-party dominated system to a multi-party system, where regional parties have the opportunity to represent diverse interests, with regional parties playing an important role. This competition is the mainstay of a democracy, in which all individuals have the opportunity to represent their interests, although the current BJP dominance is trying to re-establish one-party supremacy. But today the opposition is stronger than ever, with various regional parties challenging the BJP in Delhi, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

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