

Contextual Shifts and the Transformation of Indian Politics

The last two decades of Indian politics represent a phase of profound transformation marked by complexity, contestation, and structural change. These developments cannot be understood through a single causal explanation; rather, they emerged from the interaction of multiple political, social, and economic processes.

As the chapter suggests, this period is not only difficult to interpret but also controversial, as it involves deep conflicts and ongoing debates. Nevertheless, an examination of the major developments since the late 1980s allows us to make sense of the transition from a dominant-party system to a more competitive and fragmented political order.

The decade of the 1990s marks a crucial turning point in Indian politics. One of the most significant developments was the decline of the Congress party's dominance. In the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress had secured an overwhelming majority with 415 seats.

However, by 1989, its strength had declined sharply to 197 seats. This electoral setback symbolised the end of what political scientists had described as the "Congress system."

While the Congress continued to remain an important political force and even returned to power in 1991, it no longer occupied the central and dominant position it once held.

The party system thus underwent a structural transformation, moving away from one-party dominance toward a more competitive multi-party configuration.

Parallel to this political shift was the emergence of the "Mandal issue," which fundamentally altered the nature of political representation in India.

The decision of the National Front government in 1990 to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission—providing reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in central government jobs—triggered intense social and political reactions.

Violent protests broke out in several parts of the country, particularly among those opposing the policy. At the

same time, the issue generated a new political consciousness among OBC communities, leading to their increased mobilisation and participation in electoral politics.

Thus, Mandalisation not only redefined the discourse on social justice but also reshaped the structure of political competition.

Another equally important development during this period was the shift in India's economic policy. Beginning in the late 1980s and becoming more visible in 1991, India adopted a new economic approach often described as the structural adjustment programme or the New Economic Policy.

This marked a significant departure from the earlier model of state-led development that had guided the country since independence.

The new policies emphasised liberalisation, privatisation, and integration with the global economy. Although these reforms were criticised by various political groups and social movements, successive governments continued to pursue them, indicating a growing convergence among political parties on economic policy.

The rise of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement constitutes another critical dimension of this transformative phase.

The long-standing dispute over the site in Ayodhya gradually evolved into a central political issue, influencing the direction of debates on secularism and democracy. The movement mobilised large sections of society and contributed to the rise of new political forces.

The dispute, rooted in historical and religious claims, led to significant political developments and eventually culminated in the Supreme Court's verdict in 2019, which resolved the issue through constitutional means. This episode illustrates how deeply intertwined religion, politics, and law can become in a democratic society.

Finally, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 marked a turning point in the leadership of the Congress party. His death created a leadership vacuum, leading to the emergence of P. V. Narasimha Rao as Prime Minister.

Although the Congress emerged as the single largest party in the 1991 elections, it operated in a fundamentally altered political environment

characterised by declining dominance and increasing competition.

Taken together, these developments signalled the beginning of a new era in Indian politics. The collapse of single-party dominance, the rise of identity-based mobilisation, the shift in economic policy, and the growing importance of ideological and religious issues collectively transformed the nature of political competition.

Indian politics entered a phase marked by fragmentation, negotiation, and continuous realignment, laying the foundation for the emergence of coalition politics and a multi-party system.

This arrangement was remarkable because it brought together ideologically divergent forces, indicating a shift from ideology-based politics to pragmatic power-sharing arrangements.

The era of coalition politics was characterised by instability, fluid alliances, and frequent realignments. Governments were often dependent on the support of multiple parties, making them vulnerable to shifts in political equations.

For instance, in 1989, both the BJP and the Left supported the National Front government to keep the Congress out of power. In contrast, in 1996, the United Front government received support from the Congress and the Left to prevent the BJP from forming the government.

These changing alignments reflected the growing importance of strategic considerations over ideological consistency.

Despite initial instability, coalition politics gradually became institutionalised. The BJP emerged as a significant political force during the 1990s, leading coalition governments in 1998 and 1999 under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

The NDA government formed in 1999, under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, completed its full term, demonstrating that coalition governments could provide stable governance.

Over time, coalition politics became the norm, with successive governments—whether led by the BJP or the Congress—depending on alliances with regional parties.

The rise of coalition politics was closely linked to the increasing importance of regional parties. These parties represented specific regional, linguistic, and social interests, and their participation became essential for forming governments at the Centre.

This development reflected the deepening of democracy, as previously marginalised groups found representation in the political system.

At the same time, the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations led to the political rise of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The recognition of OBCs as a distinct political category transformed the nature of electoral politics. Political parties began to mobilise support on the basis of caste identities, leading



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Coalition Politics and the Rise of Social Justice Movements

The most visible outcome of the structural changes initiated in the late 1980s was the emergence of coalition politics as a defining feature of Indian democracy. The 1989 general elections marked the beginning of this phase, as no single party was able to secure a clear majority in the Lok Sabha.

Although the Congress emerged as the largest party, it chose to sit in the opposition. The National Front, an alliance led by the Janata Dal and supported by several regional parties, formed the government with external support from both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Left Front.

to the emergence of parties that specifically represented backward castes.

These parties demanded greater representation in government and sought to ensure a fair share of political power for OBC communities. The Mandal issue thus shifted the focus of politics from elite dominance to issues of social justice and representation.

Parallel to the rise of OBC politics was the emergence of Dalit assertion. Organisations such as the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) played a crucial role in mobilising Dalits and other marginalised groups.

This mobilisation eventually led to the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram.

The BSP articulated the idea of “Bahujan” politics, representing the majority comprising Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and minorities. Its electoral success in states like Uttar Pradesh marked a significant shift in Indian politics, as a party supported primarily by Dalits achieved substantial political influence.

However, the relationship between Dalit and OBC politics was not always harmonious. In many regions, these groups competed for political power and resources, highlighting the complexity of identity-based politics.

Nevertheless, both movements contributed to the democratisation of Indian politics by challenging traditional hierarchies and expanding political participation.

In essence, the period after 1989 witnessed a profound transformation in the structure of political competition. Coalition politics and the rise of social justice movements reshaped the Indian political landscape, making it more inclusive but also more complex.

The interplay between regional aspirations, caste-based mobilisation, and coalition governance defined this phase, setting the stage for further developments in the decades to come.

Communal Politics, New Consensus, and the Contemporary Political Order

Another significant dimension of the transformation in Indian politics since the 1990s has been the rise of communal politics and the accompanying debates on secularism and democracy.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), formed in 1980 after the break-up of the Janata Party, gradually emerged as a major political force by mobilising support around the ideology of Hindutva.

Initially, the BJP adopted a broader platform that included elements of “Gandhian socialism,” but after 1986, it increasingly emphasised cultural nationalism and Hindutva as the core of its political identity.

Two major developments contributed to this shift. The first was the Shah Bano case of 1985, in which the Supreme Court ruled in favour of granting maintenance to a divorced Muslim woman.



The subsequent decision of the government to pass legislation overturning the judgment was criticised by the BJP as an example of minority appeasement. This issue brought questions of gender justice, personal law, and secularism into the political arena.

The second development was the Ayodhya dispute, which became a focal point of communal politics. The dispute over the Ram Janmabhoomi site involved competing religious claims and evolved into a major political movement.

The unlocking of the disputed structure in 1986, the subsequent mobilisation by various groups, and the

demolition of the structure in 1992 intensified communal tensions and raised serious concerns about the nature of Indian democracy.

However, the eventual resolution of the dispute through a Supreme Court verdict in 2019 demonstrated the capacity of democratic institutions to address complex and sensitive issues through legal and constitutional processes.

Alongside these developments, the party system in India underwent further transformation. The period after 1989 is often characterised by a bipolar competition between two major coalitions: the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

Elections during this period reflected intense competition between these coalitions, although smaller parties continued to play a crucial role in determining outcomes.

The elections of 2004 and 2009 saw the Congress-led UPA come to power, while the BJP-led NDA returned to power with a clear majority in 2014 and 2019.

The 2014 elections were particularly significant, as the BJP secured a single-party majority for the first time in three decades, marking a shift away from the coalition era.

However, even with a majority, the continued relevance of alliances indicated that coalition politics remained an important feature of the political system.

Despite intense competition, an important feature of this period has been the emergence of a broad political consensus on several key issues.

First, there is widespread agreement among political parties on the direction of economic policy. Although differences remain in emphasis and implementation, most parties support the continuation of economic reforms.

Second, there is a general acceptance of the political and social claims of backward castes. Reservations for OBCs and their participation in governance are now widely supported across the political spectrum.

Third, the role of regional parties in national politics has been acknowledged and institutionalised. These parties have become integral to the functioning of the political system.

Finally, there is a growing emphasis on pragmatic considerations over ideological commitments, with parties forming alliances based on strategic interests rather than shared ideology.

In conclusion, Indian politics since 1989 has undergone a transformation from a system dominated by a single party to a competitive, multi-party system characterised by both conflict and consensus.

While coalition politics, identity-based mobilisation, and communal issues have introduced new complexities, they have also contributed to the deepening of democracy by expanding representation and participation.

At the same time, the emergence of a new consensus on key issues suggests a degree of stability within this dynamic and evolving political landscape. Indian democracy continues to evolve through a process of continuous negotiation and adaptation, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the society it represents.

