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Realities, Implications, Prospects**

by

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India's Fifteenth General Election: Realities, Implications, Prospects

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ABSTRACT:

India's fifteenth general election took place in five phases during April 16, 2009 and May 13, 2009, which witnessed 59.7 percent of the 714 million electorate voting. Coming 57 years after independent India voted to constitute its legislatures at both the levels, it indicated a number changes that voting behaviour has undergone in these years. The decline of the one-party dominant system brought about an era of coalition politics in national politics. State/Regional parties gained in prominence. This essay goes beyond looking at shifts and swings in voting behaviour in this election, contextualizing them in larger context of national politics as well as in the context of changes in the party system since independence. This seventh general election of a new era of Indian politics that has shaped in the past two decades, has witnessed a reassertion and strengthening of the Indian National Congress in particular and national parties in general, a plateauing of the state/regional parties, rise and stabilising of electoral volatility and strengthening of the larger national party in coalition politics despite cohabitation problems. The essay also contextualizes the elections and its results in the context of weakening of institutions in the country.

INTRODUCTION

General election to constitute the fifteenth Lok Sabha (the House of People, the directly elected house of the Indian parliament) took place in five phases during April 16, 2009 and May 13, 2009. Of the 714 million electorate,² 59.7 percent cast their votes in five phases of the election.³ This was the first election since the award of the Fourth Delimitation Commission that altered

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² Larger than the European Union (25 states and 350 million voters) and the USA (212 million voters) combined.

³ Given the enormity of the territory (some of them not easily accessible) and the size of the electorate the election was held in five phases: 16 April (17 states; 124 constituencies), 22-23 April (13; 141), 30 April (11; 107), 7 May (8; 85), 13 May (9; 86). <http://eci.nic.in/press/current/pn020309.pdf>, p. 5.

boundaries of 499 out of 543 Lok Sabha constituencies across twenty two states and two Union Territories. The election results that surprised both the victor (Congress and the United Progressive Alliance) and the vanquished (Bharatiya Janata Party and the National Democratic Alliance), witnessed emergence of a more confident Congress, a confused BJP and shattering of the idea of a Third Front 'n'th time and a blow to another alternative grouping that was attempting to emerge with a bargaining edge, with all options open. This is the second time in five years that surprise element came in, which was well articulated by former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee after NDA's loss in 2004 – '*Hum nahin janate hum kyon hare; jo jeete woh nahin janate woh kyon jeete*'.⁴

The surprises were in store for all – Congress, BJP, the Left Front/Third Front, the Fourth Front and the regional/state parties. The Congress for the first time since 1991 crossed 200 mark to win 206 seats.⁵ The BJP, priding itself in its 2 to 200 march between 1984 and 1998, slumped to 116 seats, despite ruling six states and being part of the ruling coalition in two states. For the first time in a decade the two major national parties together secured more than 300 seats in the Lok Sabha. Other 'national parties', including CPM (reduced to 16 from 43 in 2004) and CPI (reduced to 4 from 10 in 2004) – who suffered losses both individually as well as as the Left Front coalition partners (reduced to 24 from 58 in 2004) – who secured 54 seats, taking the national parties in the 545 member house to 376. The Fourth Front formed as a bargaining group by Lalu Yadav (Bihar) and his Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Mulayam Singh Yadav (Uttar Pradesh) and his Samajwadi Party (SP) did not do much good to either of the satraps, they managed only 27 seats, RJD being the worst performer.

Between 1996 and 2009 the Congress has always secured more than a quarter of the votes polled. Its worst during this period was 25.82 percent in 1998, when it got 141 Lok Sabha seats. Even when the party could win only 114 seats in 1999, it secured 28.3 percent votes, much better than 23.75 percent of the BJP with 182 seats. In fact, despite its gains since 1989 and leading two general election wins for its alliance and peaking at 182 in 1998 and 1999, the BJP reached/crossed 25 percent only once in 1998. In winning 61 seats more than 2004, the Congress bettered its voting percentage from 26.63 percent to 28.56, which was a welcome increase for the party, though not a swell of support it would have expected. In losing twenty two seats from 2004, BJP's voting percentage was reduced from 22.16 to 18.81, a significant loss. Looking at this electoral trend in a two decade political trajectory, i.e., 1991-2009, this could be construed as the Congress's strength, which even at its worst (1998) had (marginally) larger vote share than the BJP and more than any other single party. This is also the BJP's comprehensive limitation, which at its best (1998) could only marginally breach a quarter of the votes polled.

⁴ 'We do not know why we lost; those who won do not know why they won'.

⁵ Congress added another seat, taking its tally to 207, when party candidate Raj Babbar won from Firozabad in UP in November 2009 by-election.

Table 1: Congress, BJP and Regional Parties 1991-2009

	1991		1996		1998		1999		2004		2009	
	seats	vote%	seats	vote%	seats	votes%	seats	vote%	seats	vote%	seats	vote%
Congress	232	36.26	140	28.8	141	25.82	114	28.3	145	26.53	206	28.55
BJP	120	20.11	161	20.29	182	25.59	182	23.75	138	22.16	116	18.80
Reg. Parties	55	15.26	131	24.63	150	29.66	168	30.15	174	32.86	159	31.01

Source: Compiled from Election Commission of India data and National Election Study 2009, *EPW* September 26-October 2, 2009, p. 34.

With 159 seats and 31.01 percent votes, the state parties (including other parties)⁶ barely could manage less than one-third space in India's national politics; in fact in real terms they lost visible space in seats (29.28%) and votes. In 2004 state and other parties had secured nearly thirty three percent votes and thirty two percent seats. Taking into account the changing national and state party status of some of the smaller parties⁷ over the years, also taking into account the fact that many of the technically anointed⁸ national parties do not have a national reach, the space of the parties with national reach, if not a national party, is barely reaching half way mark even as Indian politics enters second decade of the new millennium.

These realities point to an emerging political sociology of India that appears to be grounded in down-to-earth pragmatism of power politics rather than resting on an ideological platform. As the era of coalition politics transits from alliance seeking by weakening (or weak) national parties from resurgent regional/state parties, to a resurgent national party (India's former dominant party – the Indian National Congress) as the dominant partner, new rules of coalition game are emerging. The new rules are also being influenced by generational transition in an ideologically frozen BJP, which promised to be a party with a difference only two decades back. The

⁶ The parties popularly known as regional parties are called state parties by the Election Commission of India (ECI). In the table we have taken a generic name for both state and sub-state parties.

⁷ See Mehra and Sharma (2008) Tables 2 and 3.

⁸ As per the ECI criteria a political party will be recognised as a State party if (a) its candidates have secured at least six percent of total valid votes and it has returned at least two members to the LA; or (b) if it wins at least three percent of the total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly. A National party is recognised if (a) the candidates set up by it in any four or more States at the election to the Lok Sabha or to the Legislative Assembly concerned have secured at least six percent of total votes and it has returned at least four members to the Lok Sabha from any State or States; or (b) its candidates have been elected to the Lok Sabha from at least two percent of the total seats (i.e., 11 seats in the House having 543 members), and these candidates have been elected from at least three different States.

weakening of the Left Front with the CPM's eastern citadel shaken to the roots, possibilities of new alliance strategies are likely to emerge. The prominent regional parties too would be expected to reconfigure their strategies which could be tested in state polls.

The fifteenth general election, which I would argue, is the seventh general election of a new era of Indian democracy that could be characterized as the bridging era signaling change while maintaining continuity with the dawn of democracy in India, is contextualized and analysed in this essay keeping in view the emerging political sociology of the country. The 1989 election brought down the curtain on the one party dominant system and signaled a new age of coalition politics wherein parties of all sizes and hues had a space on the national stage and in an emerging tri-polarism a secular alternative to the Congress was the political mantra acceptable across the country.

The 1991 elections indicated that both the secular and non-secular alternatives were not yet ready to step into the shoes of the Congress. But more importantly, it showed that the Congress and nation could accept and function with a leader outside Nehru-Gandhi family, only if the leader has the capacity to sustain herself/himself by politically and institutionally energise the party.

The 1996 election and its aftermath brought out three emerging trends – the decline of the Congress as the single dominant party as the finality, a leadership crisis in the contemporary Congress without the shadow of the Nehru-Gandhi banyan tree,⁹ the impracticability of a centrist alternative due to power sharing difficulties and the emergence of the BJP as the second node of the emerging coalition politics, though the Congress was still not prepared for a coalition role. The 1998 and 1999 elections did not only stabilize the coalition era in at the national level, they also brought the BJP decisively as a claimant for power at the Raisina Hill and as the second node of a binodal party system (Arora 2003), and given its limitations, a good manager of a national coalition. The 2004 and 2009 elections indicated fragility of the BJP's organisation (of the entire Sangh Parivar for that matter) and its brand of politics, sturdiness of the Congress as a national party and its strength even in a coalition era,¹⁰ relevance of national parties in Indian politics and limitations of regional/state/small parties.

This analysis of the fifteenth general election results attempts to contextualize the 2009 verdict, on the one hand, with India's larger socio-economic contexts and on the other with the 2004 elections.

⁹ It is around this time that senior Congress leader Vasant Sathe referred to crab mentality in Congress that was damaging the party.

¹⁰ We are not suggesting here that the Congress is institutionally strong as compared to other parties. Institutional deficit is endemic in all the Indian parties. At a given time and opportunity which ever party organises itself better scores. The politics of default too has determined electoral wins and losses.

TRENDS FROM 2004

The victory of the UPA in second consecutive general election, a better electoral performance of the Congress, alliance pattern as well as trends in cohabitation of the coalition partners have continuity from the trends that emerged following the fourteenth general election in 2004. In the section below, therefore, I am summarising my analysis of 2004 election. This analysis was undertaken based on the ECI data, CSDS-Lokniti's NES 2004 and various reports on the election, both pre-election reporting and post-election analysis, appearing in the print media. I am, therefore, not mentioning each and every source here, which can be looked at in my article (Mehra 2004).

The Indian National Congress, India's 'epochal party',¹¹ insisted on going alone till the 1999 general elections, when it slumped to its lowest ever tally in the Lok Sabha winning only 114 seats despite securing 4.5 percent (28.3%) more votes than BJP (23.75%), which won 182 seats and secured a working majority for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Strategizing more pragmatically in 2004, the Congress conjured up a pre-poll United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which swelled further with a post-poll alliances and outside from the Left parties, and India's grand old party returned

**Table 2: Congress and its Partners in 2004
Lok Sabha Elections**

Party	Seats	Vote Share
INC	145	26.69
RJD	21	2.22
DMK	16	1.82
NCP	09	1.78
PMK	06	0.56
TRS	05	0.63
JMM	05	0.48
MDMK	04	0.43
LJSP	04	0.72
JKPDP	01	0.08
RPI(A)	01	0.09
MUL	01	0.02
IND (INC)	01	0.07
Total	219	35.82

Source: McMillan (2004:AE7)

¹¹ Duverger's description of a dominant party is apt in the Indian context, 'A party is dominant when it is identified with an epoch; when its doctrines, ideas, methods, its style, so to speak, coincide with those of the epoch.' (Duverger 1979:308).

to power in a political coalition, having lost its social coalition due to plebiscitary politics¹² pursued by Indira Gandhi – she attached primacy to her leadership above the social and political alliances that were the strength of the Congress since independence movement – as well as a multi-layered articulation of societal and ethnic interest in a number of political formations. Winning 26.69 percent of the votes polled, the Congress was visibly, though not too significantly, ahead of the BJP, which secured 22.16 percent. Though the Congress was merely seven seats ahead of the BJP's 138, because its electoral support kept hovering around a quarter plus of the votes polled for fifteen years (see Table 1), a better poll alliance took it ahead of the BJP. Obviously, when the Congress could win seven more Lok Sabha seats than the BJP with just 4.37 percent more votes in an alliance with several smaller parties in 2004 general elections, it indeed represented 'Multiple Transformations' (Mehra 2004:62-71).

Indeed, an 'upsurge from below' (Mehra 2004:62-71) or a 'second democratic upsurge' (Yadav 1999:2393-2399), is at the root of this political transformation. Since this upsurge has redrawn the basis of social and political power in more ways than one, and more radically than ever before, particularly since Mandalisation of politics in India, its continuing impact has to be factored in. It radicalized the OBC¹³ politics, reenergized the dalits (Pai 2007 and Mehra 2010b) caused stirrings amongst the adivasis and unleashed a debate on inclusive policies that never was before. The rise of the BJP contextualized in this perspective, appears in social and political deficit – it could recruit and enlist the lower OBCs, Dalits, and the Adivasis with limited success, but its own social base constrained it to keep the political power confined with a powerful social minority, excluding the social group that had caused a fundamental upset in Indian Politics.¹⁴

By compelling the Congress, the political party identified with the nationalist movement, and one which has been at the core of the party system in the country (Mehra 2003b:49-82), to reconcile to political coalition in order to come to power, after an assiduously constructed social coalition base of the party crumbled during the 1980s, the Elections 2004 also signaled a definite change in the party system in India. This brings in an acceptance of India's multi-layered party systems¹⁵ which on the one hand compete locally and, on the other, strive to stake claims to power at the national stage.

I also underlined the significance of alliance politics, which follows from the above analysis and stresses the need for a 'right' kind of regional alliance. This has shown its significance in the 2009 elections too. However, the Congress strategy of simultaneously strengthening itself has underlined the strength of the nodal party in an alliance framework.

¹² Stanley A. Kochanek describes Mrs. Indira Gandhi's style as 'pyramidal decision-making structure' and making direct plebiscitary appeals to the voters (Kochanek 1976: 104-05). Also see, Mehra (2003a:21-48).

¹³ Other Backward Classes.

¹⁴ See the special pull out supplement in *The Hindu*, 'How India Voted: Verdict 2004', Thursday, May 20, 2004 based on the CSDS-Lokniti, NES 2004.

¹⁵ For the rationale for using party systems in the plural see my Introduction in Mehra, Khanna, Kueck (2003)

The overlapping of the caste and class conundrum in determining voting choice in India showed a peculiar arithmetic. BJP and most of its allies have maintained the support of socially and economically privileged. 43 percent of the ‘middle class’ (or the well-off) for whom ‘India Shining’ mattered, voted for the NDA. However, only 31 percent of the very poor voted for the NDA. The Congress alliance, on the other hand, did badly among the well-to-do, but better with the poor. But in the states where the Left had a sway, Congress did better among the upper classes, while the poor and the very poor voted for the Left. On the Caste-Community scale, 55 percent of upper caste Hindus voted for the NDA this time; going down the Hindu caste order, the NDA does not fare too well. However, the NDA got nearly 40 percent of the OBC votes. The Congress, of course, has a huge lead among all the OBCs. The Congress also has a huge lead among Dalits (35 percent votes), while the NDA could muster only 23 percent. It must be noted that Dalits were a traditional constituency of the Congress, but now the Bahujan Samaj Party takes away nearly 30 percent of the Dalit votes, across the country. Though the Congress maintains a lead among the Adivasis, but by consciously wooing them. Similarly, the Congress could get 47 percent Muslims to vote for them, which is the highest community-wise, but the SP posed a challenge to it in UP since the Ayodhya controversy. The BJP and the NDA did not succeed in getting substantial Muslim support in 2004 elections.¹⁶

Further, four national parties – Congress, BJP, CPM, and CPI – had together won 336 of the 445 (i.e. 62%) Lok Sabha seats with 56 percent of the votes polled. If we look at the alliances, the three main alliances – UPA, NDA, and the Left – had won 479 out of 545 (i.e. 88%) seats with 80 percent votes polled. Indeed, it shows that the votes were not as much fragmented as they were made out to be. What has been mentioned as fractured mandate is actually vote-fragmentation due to fractures in the party system, or the fractures in political mobilization that have incapacitated parties or their alliances from consolidating the mandate.

The puzzle of a comfortable working majority for the UPA and a clear verdict against the NDA despite narrow outcomes is attempted to be solved by reference to the mechanics of elections.

Basically, what appears to be a decisive defeat for the NDA was an artefact of the peculiar votes-seats relationship that obtains in our FPTP electoral system. This mechanical effect exaggerated a significant but small movement of votes into a much greater loss of seats for the NDA. The NDA actually did not lose all over the country. While the NDA emerged the winner in its confrontation with the Congress, it simply could not take on the combined might of the Congress’ new alliance (Yadav 2009:40).

My analysis of 2004 also showed that the leadership question – Atal Behari Vajpayee vs. Ms. Sonia Gandhi (whose foreign origin was made an electoral issue by the BJP) – did not eventually make any impact on the outcome of the election. This point was buttressed by 2009 election too, because the BJP not only made a strong and effective leadership, that of L.K. Advani, its

¹⁶ Conclusions drawn from the ECI and NES data.

main poll campaign, it also attacked Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as a weak and ineffective (*nikamma*) leader. The campaign did not bear fruit; it perhaps boomeranged. Obviously, more than a negative campaign against a leader or a party's leadership, a positive campaign is likely to make greater impact. Obviously, it has to be realistically positioned.

Programmatically, the 2004 elections did not help the BJP, particularly its 'India Shining' campaign that sought to project the NDA's success in economic field. Indeed by all accounts if the NDA did not have a spectacular success in economic rejuvenation of the country, it did not do too badly either. Whether 2009 elections helped the Congress and the UPA deserves an analysis. I am saying this because from the beginning 2009 election had been characterised as a collection of several local and state level elections. It has also been referred to as an election that completely lacked a national level wave of any kind, though an emerging national trend became visible as the results trickled in. Obviously, the micro factors that led to a fresh revival of the Congress fortunes at the cost of the BJP and state/regional parties would have to be factored in from the perspective of Indian democracy. It is equally significant to analyse the loss of political and electoral gloss by the BJP and review its ideological and organisational character in that perspective. The point made in the earlier paragraph regarding a realistic positioning of the positive campaign needs emphasis here too.

VERDICT 2009

A detailed analysis of the fifteenth general elections by (NES 2009) the Lokniti team of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies seek to demolish some 'myths' on which several analysts based their conclusions.¹⁷ The myths included emerging bipolarity, decreasing role of the regional parties and leaders, a support for the economic reform process which would now continue uninterrupted, a display of political acumen and governmental skill by the Congress, the lack of such skills amongst the opposition, BJP included, and lack of an alternative model of economic development with the left parties.

Substantively the broad conclusions drawn by the NES team based on their data are as follows:

- The victory of the UPA and improvement in electoral performance of the Congress in 2009 elections could be due to a shift within the 'third electoral system.'¹⁸

¹⁷ see special issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV (39), September 26-October 2, 2009.

¹⁸ Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar articulated the changes in Indian politics since decline of the Congress as 'Third Electoral System' which is characterised by emergence of a stable coalition government at the national level. The Congress's successful entry into the coalition arena in 2004 confirmed continuance of this system, which began in 1998-1999. This system is also signified by proliferation of political parties, a saturation of democratic upsurge, decline in electoral volatility due to reconfiguration of the party system, a subtle but crucial change in the creation and articulation of caste blocs in electoral politics and an ideological convergence. Yadav and Palshikar (2009b:393-429).

- The UPA's 'spectacular victory' was tempered by a modest popular vote share. Despite a modest loss of 0.13 percent in vote share, the combine added forty seats.
- The gains of the Congress were not as evenly spread across the states as the loss of the BJP. While the BJP's losses were spread across the country, the Congress gained with a moderate swing in a few states that were accounted for also by new allies such as the Trinamool Congress. A direct contest with BJP in 115 seats the Congress gained 3.1 percentage point and the BJP lost 5-3 percentage points, which tilted the scale in favour of the Congress. The distribution of the rise in Congress votes yielded a disproportionately large share of seats in some key states.
- Wins and losses of the allies became a factor in election 2009 too.
- A shift in the 'third electoral system' in terms of caste, community and ethnicity remained the primary building bloc of 'political affiliation', but a saturation of the politics of social identity at the macro level made the difference. Also, huge constituencies of lower Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and 'Maha Dalits' remained outside the catchment area of the 'caste based' parties.
- There has been decline in the very high level of electoral volatility resulting in a decline in 'a habitual anti-incumbency'.
- Continuing the trend from 2004, the urban-rural cleavage was considerably narrowed down in 2009.
- The UPA has retained the edge developed in 2004 among the non-caste Hindus, but there are no signs of further consolidation. The Congress also gained among the adivasis.
- There has been depolarisation of Muslim votes, but it took different directions in different states of the country. The Congress, however, gained a modest increase of two percent of the Muslim votes.
- 'Something of an intuitive political understanding appears to have guided a series of small but vital decisions by the Congress leaders from 2004 to 2009: a correct reading of the effects of economic reforms and the deployment of the aam adami language in 2004, a series of pro-people legislative and policy initiatives (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right to Information Act, the Forest Act, and so on), deft handling of the terrorist attack issue that did not disappoint the middle class; Sonia Gandhi's decision not to become the prime minister, the consistent refusal of Rahul Gandhi to get involved in government and coalition management that was different from what the NDA did.'¹⁹

¹⁹ The parties in India since the first general election have focused on caste and ethnic mobilisation, what I have referred to as social coalition (Mehra 2000:77-94). This refers to programmatic mobilisation, which too has been a significant part of

- Alliances too made a significant difference.

The conclusions relate to a broad array of factors. The underlying argument indicates that the electoral changes in India appear to rest on a fickle fulcrum. There are no major factors impacting the result – either change (as in 2004), or sustenance (as in 2009). The voter, both rural and urban, is alive and aware, whatever the level of electoral participation. Both social and political alignments appear to be fleeting, indicating on the one hand both mobilisational and choice-based uncertainties and, on the other, highly transitional, non-ideological and expedient alignment pattern. Policies, leadership and organisational issues lurk in the background, giving a mixed signal regarding their significance in electoral sweepstakes. I would like to add a few observations emerging from the data beyond the conclusions drawn by the NES.

The votes and seats analysis of the NES indicates how the results could gravitate, if not swing, in favour of one or the other party or combination. Seats-votes multiplier analysis of the NES gives a clear edge to the Congress and the UPA (Yadav 2009b: Table 3, 37). However, despite making major gains from 2004 neither the Congress, nor the UPA, added much to its vote kitty – while the Congress added 2.02 percentage points, the UPA actually lost 0.13; which are explained in terms of the Congress contesting a few more seats, even when the alliance pattern of the UPA changed (Yadav 2009b:33-36). Beyond the explanation that ‘there is very little dramatic shift in the popular support for Congress and its allies’, the significance of both these developments deserves underlining. That the Congress, which contested 27 seats more than 2004, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which contested 65 seats more in 2009, improved their tallies in different degrees in both seat share (Congress contested 440 seats, 27 more than 2004, winning 40 more seats; BSP contested 500 seats, 65 more than 2004, winning 2 more seats) and vote share (Congress improved by 2.13 percent and BSP by 0.84 percent), indicates that contesting more seats may not necessarily be the panacea for larger success or a larger national reach. What, however, is not clear is that how the BSP’s replacing the CPM, which contested only 82 seats and managed 5.33 percent vote share, at number three by getting 6.17 percent national vote share by contesting 500 seats appears a ‘real’ political gain. Of course, BSP’s contest in 500 seats indicates a much larger national vote share than CPM’s contest in 82 seats, many of which would be in its strongholds, which were contested in alliance with its left front partners. The CPM lost 27 seats while the BSP gained a modest two seats. Obviously, a neat conclusion is difficult to draw from statistical exercises in a situation of such keen political competition, which continues despite a relative decline in electoral volatility that marked 1996-2004. A more field-based qualitative as well as quantitative analyses are called for.

The NES conclusions on vote and seat share with regard to gains and losses of various parties and political formations perceptively maps the emerging trends of their support base and strength, some of which nonetheless deserve further explanations and elaboration (Yadav 2009b:36-

electoral strategies in India. Indira Gandhi’s ‘*garibi hatao*’ and ‘*Congress ka haath, aam admi kay sath*’ refers to this strategy.

37). All the major trends – a ‘modest gain’ for the Congress and its allies, a ‘dramatic decline’ for the BJP and the NDA, the losses of the Left, the ‘gains’ for the BSP – appear interlinked as part of a larger electoral and political trend, rather than isolated events situated in water tight compartments. Congress and BSP gained from enlarged number of seats they contested both in terms of vote share and seats, but this strategy did not pay dividends for BJP and CPM (the Left Front included). This showed that decline and gains, dramatic or moderate, are not only interlinked, there are also obvious multi-directional flows of the declines to the gains, which could be taken as shared, i.e., the residues from the decline of some parties do not have a uni-directional flow; they have been dispersed widely. The UPA and the Congress, whose gains appear to be moderate in the NES, are obviously beneficiaries of wide dispersals and they got the critical mass right for their victory, aside from the fact that emerging distribution of the Congress votes yielded ‘a disproportionately large share of seats in some key states where it was pitted against the BJP or against the Left.’ (Yadav 2009b:37)

Whether or not the 2009 verdict is an end to non-Congressism, or is the epitaph of pro-BJPism, or a freezing of, if not an end to, the politics of Hindutva, is still difficult to say conclusively. In fact, given the unpredictable political weather of the Indian politics, where anti-incumbency is as (at times more) significant a factor as pro-incumbency, the electoral wind could blow in any direction, making decline and revival of political fortunes of emerging factors. Since the ninth general elections in 1989, which brought a decisive end to the one-party dominant system and the Congress, electoral volatility has been high. Barring 1991, when the Congress was able to conjure up a working majority and managed to be in power for a full five-year term despite uncertainties of the number game, the national electoral results have neither reflected pro-Congressism, nor pro-BJPism. Indeed, if there was anti-Congressism, it is reflected in its declining fortunes till 1999; 2004 showed only a partial revival, where a carefully constructed alliance politics that brought the BJP to power in 1998 and 1999 failed it. As the election clearly showed that the BJP did not lose as much as its alliance partners, particularly TDP and AIADMK, lost. It also showed the limits of the politics of Hindutva, with or without economic reforms. A further strengthening of the Congress fortunes in 2009, a reduction of the BJP’s seats and a political assertion of the Congress vis-à-vis the regional parties is current reality, but not necessarily a trend, which would unfold gradually as post-general election politics unfolds. Of particular significance would be the Congress’s strategies in states such as UP, Bihar, MP, Gujarat, Karnataka, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh, and the counter politics by BSP, JD(U), BJP, Shiromani Akali Dal and TDP to retain or recapture their hard earned political turf.

In fact, both the main national parties – Congress and BJP – have imperatives to strengthen their organisations individually. The Congress has greater compulsions and rationale to do so as it is the only party with a nation-wide organisation and support base, hence it is the only national party beyond the techno-administrative definitions. Congress has a serious leadership deficit in many key states such as Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, MP, Orissa, UP, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, and so on. Both ambitions and image/agenda clashes with alliance partners on the one hand and the party’s own political compulsions on the other also continue to remain significant factors. The BJP has neither ever held power

at the national level on its own, nor does it have the capacity to win absolute majority in the Lok Sabha without state-wise alliances. It must be stressed that domain clashes are prevalent and they would continue to be present in both the cases. The BJP is more accommodating. Obviously, state elections between the fifteenth and the sixteenth general elections (when ever it is held) would hold the key to a more uniform trend, if at all that emerges. Aside from swings in the voter inclination, a lot would, therefore, depend on how parties and alliances conduct themselves. Otherwise we will keep drawing same meaning out of continuing political madness.

Naturally, the emerging trends with regard to national parties and smaller parties, variously addressed as regional parties or state parties, too deserve an analysis. Table 3 clearly shows the fickleness of the ECI criteria. Over the past seven general elections in two decades, twelve parties have been classified as national parties. Four of them do not exist any more. Only one – BSP – has displayed a consistency in retaining its status as a national party since 1991. The CPI is reportedly in the process of losing its national status, though there is no formal ECI notification on it as yet and the RJD got a massive drubbing soon after being notified as a national party in the 2009 elections. It has requested the ECI to put on hold a decision on its national status till the Bihar State Legislative Assembly election in 2011. Only four parties – Congress, BJP, CPM and CPI – have consistently remained, and perhaps continue to be, national parties both electorally and in their national organisational reach in the past two decades, i.e. since the evolution of the post-Congress polity. Except for the current weakening of BJP (which could be transitional) and the Left (about which a definitive formulation is difficult to make for the time being), only emerging trend is the sustenance of the BSP's national status. None of the rest of the national parties in the list has a national reach. Most of them, such as BSP, NCP and RJD, are one state parties with some presence a few other states. Obviously, after two

Table 3: National Parties in the Lok Sabha since 1989²⁰

S.No.	Parties ²¹	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
1	INC ^{@μψπ} ⋈ ^{♣§}	197	232	140	141	114	145	206
2	BJP ^{@μψπ} ⋈ ^{♣§}	85	120	161	182	182	138	116
3	JD/JD(U) ^{@μψπ} ⋈	143	59	46	6	21 ²²	8	20
4	CPM ^{@μψπ} ⋈ ^{♣§}	33	35	32	32	33	43	16
5	CPI ^{@μψπ} ⋈ ^{♣§}	12	14	12	9	4	10	4
6	BSP ^π ⋈ ^{♣§}	3	2	11	5	14	19	21
7	NCP ^{♣§}	-	-	-	-	12	9	9
8	RJD [§]	-	-	-	17	7	24	4
9	SAP ^{ψπ}	-	-	8	12	-	-	-
10	JD(S) ^μ ⋈	-	-	-	-	1	3	-
11	JNP ^{@μψ}	-	5	-	1	-	1	-
12	ICS(SCS) ^{@μ}	1	1	-	-	-	-	-

Source: compiled from the ECI data.

decades of evolution of the post-Congress Indian polity and at a juncture when the Congress is making intense efforts to revive itself, though it has not given up its dynastic plank, the BJP is finding hard to rediscover itself, and the Left appears at a loss with itself and the emerging times, it is important to begin a nuanced analysis to delineate ‘national parties’. Electorally, the four common national parties in the past two decades have secured 63 percent seats with 54.13 percent votes and seven national parties in 2009 have secured 69.24 percent seats with 63.35 percent votes (Table 4).

Table 4: National & State Parties in the Lok Sabha 1989-2004

Year	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
No. of Contesting National Parties	8	9	8	7	7	6	7
No. of Common National Parties	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
No. of Seats (%age of votes) won by the National Parties	471 (79.34)	466 (80.65)	403 (69.08)	387 (67.98)	369 (67.11)	364 (62.89)	376 (63.58)

²⁰ @National Parties as per the ECI in 1989.

^μNational Parties as per the ECI in 1991.

^ψNational Parties as per the ECI in 1996.

^πNational Parties as per the ECI in 1998.

⋈National Parties as per the ECI in 1999.

[♣]National Parties as per the ECI in 2004.

[§]National Party as per the ECI in 2009.

²¹ INC (Indian National Congress), BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), JD/JD(U) (Janata Dal-United), CPM (Communist Party of India-Marxist), CPI (Communist Party of India), BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party), NCP (Nationalist Congress Party), RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal), SAP (Samata Party), JD(S) (Janata Dal-Secular), JNP (Janata Party), ICS(SCS) {Indira Congress (Socialist-Sarat Chandra Sinha)}.

²² Of these seats, the JD (U) got 21 seats, while J D (S) got just one.

No. of Seats (%age of votes) won by all the State Parties*	46 (15.41)	54 (15.19)	131 (24.63)	150 (29.66)	168 (30.15)	174 (32.86)	159* (31.01)
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*Recognised and registered (unrecognised) State Parties.

Source: Compiled from the ECI data.

State/Regional parties have plateaued nearly at one-third mandate since 1999, with a slight, but visible, decline in 2009 (Mehra and Sharma 2009). As indicated at the outset, the regional/state parties have secured 159 (29.28%) seats and 31.01 percent votes

Table 5: Vote share for National and other parties since 1952

Year	Vote Share					Seat Share				
	All National Parties	State Parties	Other Regtd. Parties	Total - state & other parties	Total seats	All National parties	State parties	Other regtd. parties	Total - state & other parties	% of seats with state & other parties
1952	76.00	8.10	--	8.10	489	418	34	--	34	6.95
1957	73.08	7.60	--	7.60	494	421	31	--	31	6.28
1962	78.50	9.28	1.17	10.45	494	440	28	6	34	6.88
1967	76.13	9.69	0.39	10.08	520	440	43	2	45	8.65
1971	77.84	10.17	3.62	13.79	518	451	40	13	53	10.23
1977	84.67	8.80	1.03	9.83	542	481	49	3	52	9.59
1980	85.07	7.69	0.81	8.50	529	485	34	1	35	6.62
1984	79.80	11.56	0.72	12.28	514	451	58	0	58	12.86
1989	79.34	9.28	6.13	15.41	529	471	27	19	46	8.70
1991	80.58	13.08	2.08	15.26	534	478	51	4	55	10.30
1996	69.08	22.43	2.20	24.63	543	403	129	2	131	24.13
1998	67.98	18.79	10.87	29.66	543	387	101	49	150	27.62
1999	67.11	26.93	3.22	30.15	543	369	158	10	168	30.94
2004	62.89	28.90	3.96	32.86	543	364	159	15	174	32.04
2009	63.58	--	--	31.01	543	376	--	--	159	29.28

Source: Data Unit, Lokniti-CSDS, Delhi and 2009 election data.

in the fifteenth general elections. It confirms the trend of the past. Table 4 indicates that the regional parties have got 15 seats fewer than 2004. The vote percentage too shows a 0.15 percentage point decline. The data on vote share and seat share since 1996 nonetheless shows a consistent correspondence between the two. Clearly, the vote share of the state and other parties has reached a critical level, which helps them with corresponding share in the Lok Sabha seats. There is indeed a plateauing of the vote share since 1998, 0.15 percentage point decline between 2004 and 2009, resulting in 2.76 percentage point decline in seat share, but it is still too early to predict a decline of their electoral and political strength (see Table 5). While the BJP is attempting to rediscover itself since the change of guard in December 2009 to the next generation of leaders, the resurgence

of the Congress in the past few years could also determine the fate of regionalisation of the party system.²³

The significance of the 2009 elections should also be judged in terms of the emerging trends in alliance politics, particularly from the perspective of the politics of cohabitation.²⁴ Importantly, barring 1991, the results of six elections (1989, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009) have either led to, or have been the outcomes of alliance politics – pre-poll, post-poll or both. The emerging political and electoral trends shaping the fifteenth general election and following it would have to be put in the context of the nature of the politics of coalition and cohabitation. The Congress would definitely need its allies, both ‘national’ and regional to run the UPA. Given the fact that UPA has not really crossed 50 percent mark, Congress also has to keep parties that could give it outside support from issue to issue, such as RJD, SP and BSP. But its stakes in Bihar and UP is likely to create issues of cohabitation from time to time. Further, with 206 seats in the Lok Sabha and 21 from UP, the party appears in high spirits over its recent ascendance in the state politics. During UPA-I Congress was accused by some of its smaller allies of cornering most of the plum positions, the situation does not have changed substantially. The Congress appears more confident in doing so in the UPA-II, it could be more belligerent towards its alliance partners. However, in larger political terms the role of the regional parties could come under a close watch. In the ruling alliance, DMK, AITC, NCP and so on, parties either with substantial presence or having a heavy-weight leader (or both), would matter. The Congress appears to sit comfortably after giving them some key portfolios, with the spirit of non-interference beyond larger policy guidelines. The parties supporting the UPA from outside appear to be developing irrelevance, but also find themselves short of political options – SP in UP is in such a situation. In a larger perspective, the Dravidian parties (DMK and AIDMK), SAD, JD (U), and a few others like the Shiv Sena could remain relevant, but most others would face political irrelevance; they may still exist with uncertain future. While parties like the Shiv Sena could become aggressive, the proliferation of parties could temporarily be halted.

²³ A recent analysis shows that of 992 Legislative Assembly seats in various states that went to polls in 2009, Congress won 360 seats and BJP 79. Further, of the seven states that went to polls in 2009, the Congress lost two – Orissa and Sikkim, which have not been the party stronghold for quite a while. The party won a second term each in Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Haryana and pulled off a third consecutive victory in Maharashtra. It also improved its position in Jharkhand, the state where the party had been at the centre of murky politics since its inception. The Congress-led alliance won 440 seats in these state elections and the BJP alliance 125. Other set of national parties, mainly consisting of the Left do not have much sway except in their stronghold in three states – West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. Obviously, regional parties, some of which are part of either the Congress or the BJP alliance, hold sway in state politics. (Subrahmanyam 2010:10).

²⁴ The concept of cohabitation has been developed by the Centre for Public Affairs (New Delhi) research collective that attempted, in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, analyses of factors that were likely to affect the fifteenth general elections. For details on how the concept has been used in an analysis of coalition politics see Kailash (2010:86-113).

Table 6: Tussles in Alliance Politics 2004-2009

STATE	TUSSLE
Bihar	JD (U)-BJP, Cong-RJD/LJP
Jammu & Kashmir	Cong-PDP, Cong-NC
Jharkhand	BJP-JMM, Cong-JMM
Karnataka	JD (S)-any alliance party
Kerala	Cong.-NCP (emerging)
Maharashtra	Cong.-NCP, BJP-SS, SS-MNS
Meghalaya	Cong.-NCP
Odisha	BJP-BJD
Uttar Pradesh	Cong-SP/BSP
West Bengal	BJP-AITC, Cong.-AITC

Table 6 gives a glimpse of major cohabitation tussles in alliance politics in India that have emerged since the 2004 elections, but continue to persist in accentuated fashion since even after the fifteenth general election. Obviously, the problems continue not merely with Congress and its partners, but most major parties are obviously to be part of it. The tussle between Janata Dal (U) and BJP in Bihar is an old one that has got accentuated recently. In the 2009 elections, Congress' alliance partners RJD and Lok Janashakti Party decided to keep their stakes in the UPA while exploring new frontiers as the fourth front. The Congress-People's Democratic Party partnership in J&K was as uneasy as the Congress-National Conference partnership is now. Jharkhand Mukti Morcha has maintained its reputation as a strange bedfellow with both Congress and BJP. Nationalist Congress Party maintains its uneasy partnership with the Congress in Maharashtra, Meghalaya and now has opened a new front in Kerala. BJP-Shiv Sena partnership in Maharashtra too has had its moments of tension. Orissa has witnessed political drama between the Biju Janata Dal and BJP. All India Trinamool Congress of Mamata Banerjee is as unpredictable as she was with BJP. The major factor that in each of these is retention as well as creation of (new or lost) political turf. Obviously, issues of cohabitation as well as political turf wars would continue to dominate Indian politics as well as electoral politics in the country for some time to come.

This, however, may not lead to greater institutionalisation and democratisation of the regional parties. The fact that all regional parties are family based is not particularly healthy for Indian democracy. And, Shiv Sena as well as its variant MNS remain anathema to democracy. That national parties still relate to them is an issue of concern.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion brings out that elections in India have witnessed a course change since the ninth general election in 1989. The changes have come about due to a combined impact of transformations in the electoral patterns, what the CSDS-Lokniti analysis has described as India's third electoral system (Yadav 1999), as well as profound changes in the party system since the breakdown of the one-party-dominant system with the

decline of the Congress (Mehra, Khanna and Kueck 2003). Despite electoral volatility during the 1990s that witnessed five general elections and eight governments in a decade, stability in electoral and governmental domains returned by 1999 despite cohabitation problems amongst coalition partners. This stability has been confirmed by both 2004 and 2009 general elections. However, despite this stability, representative government in India is struggling with a range of issues that have been ingrained in India's procedural democracy. A day before the Indian constitution was enacted Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, chairman of the drafting committee, in a long meaningful speech made a distinction between social and political democracy and a gap between the two that needed to be bridged in the country.²⁵ The contradiction between political democracy on the one hand and social and economic democracy on the other, has not been bridged in six decades of independence and electoral politics. In fact, this contradiction over the years in India has emerged as the one between procedural democracy and substantive democracy.

Nearly two decades of economic liberalization may have reduced unemployment, pulled down the poverty line, but this 'shining India' has its darker side too. Nearly 21.1 percent of the entire rural population and 15 percent of the urban population of India exists in this difficult physical and financial predicament according to the latest World Bank report. India ranks 49th in the Global Hunger Index. More than 27 percent of the world's undernourished population lives in India while 43 percent of children under five years in the country are underweight – much higher than sub-Saharan Africa. The division of resources, as well as wealth, is very uneven in India (40 percent of growth goes to the pocket of 1 percent) – this disparity creates different poverty ratios for different states.²⁶ A latest UNDP supported report by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative that developed and applied the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) has pointed out that eight Indian states together account for more poor people than 26 poorest African nations combined.²⁷ Farmer's suicide in different

²⁵ 'On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. [...] We must remove this contradiction at the earliest moment, or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.'

B.R. Ambedkar on 25 November 1949, Constituent Assembly Debates, New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1989, vol. IX, p. 979.

²⁶ Quoting a survey by Centre for Media Studies which reported that about 37 percent of people below the poverty line and about 22 percent of people belonging to the general category are bribed to cast their votes, Balmuli Natrajan concludes that 'One cannot question electoral politics without appearing undemocratic. Electoral politics has a way of delimiting what democracy means. So, other forms of democracy (deliberative or proportional representation or even electoral reforms) are placed in the "insane" box too easily. And yet we need to take such a risk every time Indian elections arrive, not least because we learn about our freedom by seeing what is inside its prison, and learn about our sanity by seeing who is inside its asylum'. Natrajan (2009:14-17).

²⁷ This new MPI supplants the Human Poverty Index. It assesses a range of 'deprivations' at the household level from education to health outcomes to assets and services create the poverty index. As per this assessment there were 421 million poor in Bihar, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal as compared to 410 million in 26 countries in Africa. This report also claims that 55 percent of India's population is poor, of course on the

parts of the country for a decade has led to around 100,000 deaths. About 320 million Indians go to bed without food every night, an alarming situation that is getting worse and there are still starvation deaths.²⁸ Dalits still suffer both social and economic exclusion and violence against them has not ceased. Adivasis in large parts of the country are another section of the population who continue to suffer from socio-economic deprivation and the upsurge and sustenance of Maoism in the 'red corridor' has been attributed to the persisting development deficit (See Mehra 2009a and 2010b). The Sachar Committee Report brought out stark economic backwardness of the Muslims, who appeared to have been pushed against the wall socially and politically since the rise of the politics of Hindutva (India 2006). The political economy of liberalization and globalization has created development dichotomies that are spilling into violent protests (Mehra 2008a).

Still one cannot miss four significant points regarding India's sixty two years old democratic process. First, not only has the country held fifteen successful general elections, it has held several state elections too, which got effectively delinked from the national elections in 1971 when Indira Gandhi called for a mid-term poll. Second, nationally there have not only been fourteen successions to the country's leadership, there have been eleven transfers of power at the Raisina Hill, the seat of country's political power. Of course, this does not include several successions and transfers of power in the states. Third, the Constitution may have been amended 94 times in 50 years, a fact that some commentators use to point out its imperfections, it continues to be the bedrock on which Indian democratic institutions and processes have thrived. Fourth, there have also been democratic slip ups both at the national and state levels, which expose the soft underbelly of Indian democracy.²⁹

As India completed the process to elect fifteenth Lok Sabha in an election that was perceived to be issueless and an aggregation of several regional, state and local elections, the results have surprising bylines of certain national messages: i) stability; ii) the continuing space for national parties with a developmental agenda; iii) despite the emotional appeal of ethnic mobilization, programmatic mobilization too tends to succeed; iv)

basis of the indices this study team has developed and used. The report found that more than 40 percent of the population even in prosperous states such as Gujarat, Haryana and Karnataka were poor. See *The Times of India*, 13 July 2010, p.1 and *The Times of India*, 15 July 2010, p. 11.

²⁸ Speaking on Hunger in India at a public hearing on the Right to Food Amartya Sen said in New Delhi on 10 January 2003, 'When India achieved independence, more than 50 years ago, the people of the country were much afflicted by endemic hunger. They still are. Since India is often considered to be one of the great success stories in tackling the food problem, the belief in success has to be scrutinized in the light of the grim reality that we can observe.' See <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/amartya.pdf>.

²⁹ We are referring here to the national emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi between June 1975 and March 1977. If that has been referred to as the biggest democratic slip up, there have been several 'not-so-major' ones relating to the misuse of the office of Governor, continuing lack of democracy in parties and so on. Indeed, many of these have been, and perhaps should be, described as the process of maturing of Indian democracy, the frequency must come down as the country assumes democratic adulthood.

appreciation of good governance, even by state/regional parties and leaders, over caste, religion and ethnicity based politics.³⁰ The emergence of the Congress as the single largest party with 206 seats is not only a surprising national revival, its reemergence as a political force in the largest state Uttar Pradesh with 22 seats, getting second position after the SP (23)³¹ and pipping the BSP 21 to the third position, has exposed limitations of the caste based politics and ‘innovative’ *sarvajan* mobilisation in 2007 by Mayawati that fancied her prime ministerial dream.³²

This raises three significant questions regarding Indian democracy – a general one and a specific one relating to the current elections. First, why is it that despite heavy odds, poverty and deprivation, electoral participation in the general elections, including in the current one, has sustained at 50 percent plus level for over a decade? Second, why during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections people opted for the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance despite questions on the Congress’s capacity to carry along allies, its alleged arrogance as the senior partner, and its weaknesses on governance front too? Third, even though the Congress along with its UPA coalition partners, some of which (such as NCP, AITC) are its fragments, has got the mandate to govern the country for five more years, implication of this victory for various questions related to Indian democracy must be considered with introspection and caution.

The answers to the questions are related. First, we would stress what we mentioned earlier, i.e., politics of India for the past one decade has been characterized as ‘the upsurge from below’ (Mehra 2004:62-71), a process that has also been characterized as the emergence of the third electoral system, which also ‘represents a relative expansion of democratic choice for the voters as well as their efficacy’ (Yadav 1999:2393-2399). In other words, that the poor and the disadvantaged have found the electoral system in India to be a useful system and an effective instrument through which they can express themselves and make political choices, change governments and regimes and even compel political agenda should be accepted as success of the electoral system as well as democracy in India. This works on the other side too, i.e., political parties and governments at the Centre and in states have compulsions to mobilise people. The emerging political choices for the people works despite ‘sudden outburst of some of the maladies inherent in our system: the endemic multiplication in the number of political parties and

³⁰ This is starkly visible in Narendra Modi’s Gujarat. His good governance and development plans completely overshadow his rabid communalism. During the last Legislative Assembly election campaign he cleverly appealed to both the constituencies, making his communalism more dangerous.

³¹ The situation has changed after 7 November 2009 by-election in which Firozabad Lok Sabha seat was won by Congress candidate Raj Babbar, who defeated Mulayam Singh Yadav’s daughter-in-law Dimple Yadav by 85,043 votes. Firozabad was one of the two seats (Kannauj was the other) that Yadav’s son Akhilesh Yadav had won in the general election. He vacated Firozabad and his wife contested from there and lost. *The Hindu*, November 11, 2009. This brings SP’s tally in the Lok Sabha down to 22, making the Congress with 23 MPs as the largest group from politically significant Uttar Pradesh.

³² For a comprehensive and perceptive analysis of the BSP’s shift from *bahujan* (signifying assertion of the majority dalits and oppressed) to *sarvajan* (inclusive politics combining the dalits and oppressed with the higher castes under a dalit leadership) in its rhetoric as well as political strategy (see Pai 2008).

the fractionalization of the political space; the rise of regional parties and caste-community based parties that threaten to unleash fissiparous tendencies and a clash of primordial loyalties; end of ideology-based politics and the decline of political morality; and, of course, excessive political corruption, non-governance, disorder and instability.’ (Yadav 1999: 2393).

The answer to the second and third questions is embedded in the analysis of the electoral data of the 2009 elections undertaken above. Unlike in 2004, 2009 results cannot be explained in terms of national nodal parties doing better, but regional allies not doing well enough. The answer to this question is inherent in a number of variables. First, the impact of various schemes focusing on the poor, if not good governance, would have to be factored in, which perhaps made dents amongst the dalits and tribals too.³³ The Sachar Committee report on Muslim backwardness and the UPA government’s stated resolve to bring in ameliorative schemes appears to have made the Muslims drift back to the Congress, softening disenchantment since the Ayodhya demolition. The Congress for now appears to be amongst the better options for them. The BJP’s politics of securitization in the wake of terror attacks in which Muslims were seen as the villains of the piece too perhaps made the Congress a safer option.

Second, the nature, organisation, politics, programmes, leadership and political campaign of the main rival the BJP. One of the main questions to be considered is whether 2009 elections, as the 2004 elections, has exposed limits to the BJP’s politics of Hindutva. It must be admitted that despite asserting secularity of the Hindutva ideology, equating terrorism with Islam leading to stereotyping and continuing ‘otherisation’ of the Indian Muslims, violence against the Christians in Kandhmal (Orissa) and violent moral policing by its sister organisations, which the party tended to defend, could have brought in a subterranean negative political atmosphere for the party. Of course fissures within the BJP and the NDA would account for some of the limitations that the party and the formation faced. BJP’s 18.80 percent votes could be interpreted both ways.

Third, the state/regional parties, both in terms of their vote share (36.42 percent) over the years and their utility for the national parties appear to be plateauing at one-third level.³⁴ With the Congress emerging more confident after the fifteenth general elections and attempting to carry over the political thrust to win over lost constituencies across the country and society under personal care of Rahul Gandhi, regional parties appear apprehensive despite their compulsion to coalesce for a share in the national power pie.

³³ The disaggregated results from various states confirm the importance of governance variable. Bihar, for example, for a long associated with complete absence of governance, has voted for good governance given to the state by Nitish Kumar-led NDA government, wiping out satraps like Lalu Yadav, who held sway in Bihar for a decade and a half, and Ram Vilas Paswan. Same is true of Orissa, where Naveen Patnaik has been given another term. The BJP ruled Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh could not be penetrated by the UPA. In Gujarat too the BJP held fort, though the Congress did snatch away a few seats. If Andhra Pradesh expressed faith in Y. Rajashekhara Reddy’s Congress administration, Mayawati’s citadel was shaken in UP within two years of her *sarvajan* card. Kerala voted against the LDF’s wrangling and misrule.

³⁴ Mehra and Sharma (2008). Also see Mehra (2009b).

Fourth, the questions of democratisation of political parties and party building – organisation, political recruitment, political leadership – in the context of emerging political and electoral uncertainties as well as institutionalisation of the parties and party system in the world's largest democracy, also deserve examination. The party system in India since the ninth general elections in 1989 has been reconfiguring itself on several parameters – the end of the one-party-dominant-system, institutionalisation of coalition politics at the national level, the emergence of the BJP as the main rival to the Congress, the emergence of smaller state or regional parties with national stakes, the emergence of dalit politics and parties independent of national parties, federalisation of the party systems, and so on.³⁵ Two decades and six general elections, three of which were mid-term elections, later the party system deserves a relook on several counts. It is third general elections in succession when the ruling coalition looks stable, a new-look Congress is over confident, the BJP and its politics of Hindutva are on crossroads, the Left is considerably weakened and in disarray and regional parties do not seem to have the same bargaining position as in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004.

Indian democracy, and election as an instrument of its participatory and representative forms, has attracted interests of the social science community from the outset.³⁶ It has been perceived as democratic expression of the people of the country, as their judgment on the performance of the government, as an instrument of developing new political alignments, generating new political attitudes and over a period reorganizing the country's political society.³⁷ As we review the outcome and impact of the fifteenth general elections on Indian polity and society, the support building and system maintenance functions of elections and other functions under these two rubrics – legitimacy, political stability, integration, identification, assimilation, involvement, commitment, allegiance-maintaining and allegiance re-affirming, and mobilization – that Norman Palmer (1976:82) underlined, deserve review.

The post-independence Indian polity developed since the enactment of the constitution in 1950 that took a radical step in granting universal adult suffrage in a poor and largely illiterate country³⁸ and beginning of the electoral process in 1952, which has been going on smoothly, except a brief interregnum of eighteen months (June 1975-March 1977), ensuring transfer of power both at the national and state levels. Given the apprehensions about the efficacy of the post-colonial Asian and African societies to transform themselves into modern states, this has been no mean achievement. No wonder, despite several socio-economic limitations and development of certain processes and trends (such as corruption,

³⁵ See the collection of essays in its entirety in Mehra, Khanna and Kueck (2003).

³⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset has underlined voting as 'the key mechanism of consensus in democratic society.' He considered consensus that emerges through the process of elections as a fundamental value in social system, which should be focused in social science analysis more than cleavage (Lipset, 1963:12).

³⁷ Gopal Krishna quoted by Palmer (1976:11).

³⁸ Not surprisingly there were apprehensions amongst the western scholars who either predicted Balkanisation of India in the wake of inevitable disharmony and communal conflict, or foresaw structural incongruities and discontinuity due to immense popular mobilisation.

See Harrison (1960) and Huntington (1968).

criminalisation of politics, social and political conflict, sharpening of identities and parochialism, undermining and weakening of institutions) that could be termed negative (we shall discuss them later), elections have not only sustained India's representative democracy, they have also contributed to the construction of citizenship beyond caste and creed.³⁹ Earlier, in a perceptive study of *Democracy and Social Change in India*, Subrata K. Mitra and V. B. Singh stressed the construction and growth of citizenship in India through electoral competition and democratic processes set in motion by it. So much so that '... there is hardly any section of the Indian population which remains entirely untouched by the process of democratisation.' Yet, the same study also underlines '(t)he impact of social disadvantages on participation and levels of personal efficacy...' making '...certain groups, basically from the disadvantaged sections of society...less informed or insufficiently motivated'. Not surprisingly, the study puts the role of political parties too under scanner for this democratic deficit. Mitra and Singh appropriately articulate chinks in India's democratic fortress in the last decade of twentieth century and as it transitions to a new millennium (Mitra and Singh 1999:65-66, 116, 253):

Freewheeling politicians, venality, freebooting civil servants and ministers, ethnic conflict and violence, political fragmentation, are the order of the day. In the place of the sacrifice that characterised the generation of Gandhi and Nehru, we have short-term calculations of personal and narrow sectarian interests of the most blatant kind. Whereas the early years after independence were marked by great governmental stability, minority regimes and unstable coalitions now appear to be the rule. In the place of the dignified and good party men running the regions – a Gobind Ballabh Pant here and a Kamraj Nadar there – we had the tainted figures of politicians of all ideological hues.

Obviously, these and several other related issues such as corruption, criminalisation of politics, gender representations, greater institutionalisation of processes and institutions of democracy (including the political parties), emergence of a more institutionalised power sharing arrangement and greater cohabitation amongst the coalition partners at different levels are critical to greater democratisation of the Indian society and polity and elections would definitely play a greater role in the process.

³⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot has underlined percolation of fruits of political democracy in India first while analyzing the rise of the low castes in north Indian politics and recently in a co-edited volume on a similar rise in state politics. See Jaffrelot (2003) and Jaffrelot and Kumar (2009).

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