
UNIT 19 NATURE OF PARTY SYSTEM IN INDIA

Structure

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19.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the nature of the party system in India. It aims at familiarising the student of Indian politics with the fundamental features underlying the evolution of the party system in the post-independence period. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the nature of the party system in India and identify its various characteristics;
- Analyse the changing nature of the party system and explain the emerging patterns; and
- Discuss the socio-economic and the political factors underlying the changing nature of party politics.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian party system is unique. It does not fit in any kind of classification that is generally used to categorise the party systems. It is defined by the singular nature of Indian politics on the one hand and the nature of the state-society relationship on the other. In the last two decades, there has been a substantial change both in the nature of politics as well as in nature of relationship between the state and the society. One of the very important manifestations of change is visible in the context of the politicisation of greater number of people, especially those belonging to the less privileged sections of society. That explains the change in the nature of the party system as well. The distinctive features that defined the party system of India in the first two decades after independence are no more to be seen at present.

In order to understand the present nature of the party system, it is important to trace its history and to refer to its political logic in the context of the changing state-society relationship.

19.2 NATURE OF PARTY SYSTEM – FIRST TWO DECADES AFTER INDEPENDENCE

19.2.1 Evolution from Political Centre

Rajni Kothari has argued in his 'Politics in India' that the party system evolved from an identifiable political centre. This political centre, carved during the nationalist movement, was comprised of the political elite sharing common socio-economic background i.e. educated, urban, upper-caste people belonging mainly to middle and upper classes.

The common social background of the elite resulted in the homogeneity that became a defining feature of the political centre as well as of the party system. The ruling party and the opposition, both coming from the same social background, shared the social perceptions and converged on many issues. A consensus, therefore, existed within the system around the basic values.

The Indian National Congress was the institutional manifestation of this political centre. Not only was it an important expression of the nationalist movement but was also a dynamic political organisation that formed the indigenous base for the political system. Accommodating almost all-political groups of political importance, it provided a very crucial political space for political negotiations and bargaining.

19.2.2 Dominant Party System: Basic Characteristics

- 1) The party system during the first two decades after independence was termed as the Single Dominant Party system. It was a multi-party system where the ruling party played an overwhelmingly dominant role. Although a number of other political parties existed and operated politically, yet the central space of politics was occupied by the Indian National Congress only. The dominance of the Congress was determined by its immense organisational strength as well as its capability to capture large number of seats both in the Union Parliament and the state legislatures.
- 2) Dominance of the Congress as the ruling party did not mean absence of competition. The numerous parties in opposition provided competition. Yet, such competition did not result in effectively challenging the dominant position of the ruling party. Morris-Jones aptly described this phenomenon as 'dominance co-existing with competition but without a trace of alteration'. In electoral terms, it implied that although a number of opposition parties entered the electoral arena but none of them singly or in combination could secure substantial number of seats to replace the Congress as the ruling party. These parties were fragmented and poorly represented in the Union and the state legislatures. Congress continued to return its candidates in large numbers, in fact, in proportionately large numbers than the votes polled in its favour.
- 3) Due to their inability to provide an alternative to the ruling party or even to challenge its position of dominance, the opposition parties did not play the traditional role of opposition. On the contrary, their role was limited to that of constantly pressurising, criticising the ruling party. The parties in opposition, therefore, operated as the parties of pressure.
- 4) One of the important features of the Congress party that helped it to sustain its position of dominance was its capacity to represent divergent social groups and interests. As it drew its support from different sections of society, it played the

role of a great umbrella party. During the nationalist movement it had accommodated diverse groups into its fold and had stressed on the need for their unity within the same organisational structure. It had therefore assumed the character of a broad coalition. In the post-independence period, it continued to absorb the dominant social elements and balance different interests that helped it to maintain its unchallenged position of power. Through its accommodative and adaptive politics, it could curb the role and relevance of opposition.

- 5) Being a plural party representing diverse interests and ideologies, the Congress had a number of factions. Of these, some were relatively more dominant and played important role in the decision making of the party. Others were the dissident factions. Several of these factions of the Congress were also ideologically closer to some of the opposition parties. The reason for this being, that almost each of the party in opposition had been a part of the Congress at one time or the other and while choosing to form an independent party outside it, had left a faction of similar ideological orientation within it. Therefore, there always remained continuity between the politics of the Congress and that of the opposition parties. This continuity made it possible for the opposition parties to put pressure on the Congress and influence its decision making.
- 6) The party system, therefore, worked on the basis of a consensual model. It was a politics of broad consensus round the political values shared by all the political actors whether operating from within the ruling groups or from the opposition. Ideological divisions within the Congress or outside it were blurred.

19.2.3 Centrality of Congress

Due to the unique position of dominance of the Congress party, it was known to be the central institution of Indian politics. The Centrality of Congress was reflected at various levels:

- i) At one level, it occupied the most central space of electoral politics, thereby monopolising it and not allowing other parties to seriously challenge its position of power in the centre and the states.
- ii) At another level, its centrality was outlined in its occupation of the pivotal space between the state and society. Representing diverse interests of society, it remained the most important formal mediating institution of the state. It therefore, provided the most crucial space for political negotiations and bargaining.
- iii) At the third level, the centrality of the Congress was reflected in its ideological standpoint. Being an umbrella party it had space for all kinds of ideological groups. Hence, it pursued a 'centrist' ideology even when it contained ideological viewpoints of the 'left' and 'right'.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

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

- 1) What was the socio-economic background of the political elite at the time of India's independence?

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2) What is meant by 'dominance coexisting with competition but without a trace of alteration'?

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3) Why were the opposition parties known mainly to be the parties of pressure before 1976?

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4) Why was the Congress party called an umbrella party?

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5) What is meant by 'Centrality of Congress'?

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19.3 CHANGED SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE: DISLOCATION OF POLITICAL CENTRE

Change in the nature of party system in the decades after 1960s, according to Rajni Kothari, was the consequence of the 'changed socio-economic and demographic profile of the polity'. Such a change in the profile of the polity was a consequence of the political mobilisation of the masses as well as the emergence of new political classes. The political mobilisation of the masses was a logical consequence of the electoral politics based upon the principle of universal adult franchise. Frequently held elections helped in increasing the political consciousness of mass of Indians, especially those belonging to the backward and lower castes.

The emergence of the new political classes was directly related to the rise of the proprietary peasant class in rural India in the backdrop of the land reforms. By the beginning of the seventies, the land-owning socially dominant sections belonging mainly to the backward castes had attained sufficient economic strength to demand a share in political power. The entry of these castes into the competitive power politics had far-reaching consequences for the Indian politics. Firstly, there was an increase in the number of those aspiring for a share in power. The domination of the traditional

political elite, therefore, was seriously challenged. Secondly, there was also greater manifestation of a variety of conflicting interests. These new entrants did not share the political blues of the traditional elite. They had not only different demands and different expectations from the political system but they also used a different political language. This had the effect of posing a serious threat to the consensual politics of the traditional political elite in general and that of the Congress, in particular. Unable to integrate and balance varied interests, the Congress was dislocated from its position of centrality.

The changed context of politics was also the result of the assertion of the lower castes. In the politics of numbers, the lower castes and Dalits were brought into politics, initially, in the context of the patron-client relationship. As clients of the locally dominant castes, their numerical strength was used in the interest of their patrons. However, as the momentum to the participatory politics was created, the nature of lower caste politics was also changed. The lower castes and Dalits started acquiring more autonomous role in politics and their mobilisation now came to be related to their political interest. In terms of party politics, this led to the formation of parties reflecting the support and interest of these newly mobilised castes. Formation of the BSP, Samajwadi Party and Janata Dal are the examples of such political formations. These parties clearly reflected the interest of the Dalits and the Backward castes.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of this Unit.

1) What was the impact of the electoral politics based on the principle of Universal Adult Franchise on the politics of India?

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2) Why was the Congress party not so successful in integrating various interests for 1967?

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3) Give some examples of the political parties that were formed for pursuing the particular caste interests.

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19.4 PARTY SYSTEM AFTER 1967

The nature of the Indian polity as well as the party system underwent a substantial change after 1967. This change has been described in varied terms. According to Kothari, this was the beginning of the decline of the dominant party system. While Morris-Jones attributes this to the emergence of 'a market polity' in which the number of opposition parties were brought 'fully into the market place, and competition that had previously occurred within the Congress, was now brought into the realm of inter-party conflict.' A number of new political forces and formations started emerging-making the electoral politics more competitive. All this led gradually to the decline of Congress.

The change in the nature of party system, initially, was much more visible at the state level where the hegemony of the Congress party was challenged through the formation of a number of non-Congress government. The Fourth General election led to the beginning of the politics of coalitions. This election produced truncated majorities of the Congress party. Hence, coalitions were formed in many states with Jana Sangh, SSP, CPI, CPI (M), and a number of regional parties joining the government.

Meanwhile the Congress also started showing signs of its weakness at the central level. One of the initial indicators of the weakness of the Congress was the changing nature of factionalism and the sharpening of the dissidence within the party. Acute factionalism ultimately led to the split of the Congress in 1969. This split, though an internal affair of the party has far reaching consequences for the Party system of India. One of the major consequences of the split was *the decline of the consensual model of Indian politics* and of the party system. The old organisational structure of Congress that was relatively more democratic and with greater linkages at the societal levels, was replaced by a more centralised organisational set-up. This new set up was *pyramidal* in nature. The decision making within the organisation was personalised and there was no space for democratic dissent. All this had the effect of rendering the Congress organisationally very weak.

The decline of the consensual model of Indian politics was not only a manifestation of the organisational problems of the Congress party but also of the changing nature of the state-society relationship. The homogeneity that earlier characterised the nature of the elite was no more available after the mid-sixties. This was also the time when the new classes had started becoming more assertive, specifically claiming a share in political power. It was the impact of such a changed context of elite politics that the Congress failed to maintain its electoral dominance in a number of states.

By the end of the decade of the seventies, the party system both at the central level as well as the level of the states was marked by flux. This was due to the fragmentation that was taking place in political parties. It was a process that was to continue for quite some time. Yet, despite the flux, the competitiveness was a distinct feature of the party politics. The number of political parties that entered the electoral arena was also increased. All this meant that the period of the dominance of the single party was already over. A multi-party system, instead, has evolved.

At the central level of politics, the new context of politics was reflected in the emphasis on consolidation of the opposition parties against the Congress. With the split of the Congress, a 'Grand Alliance' was formed between the Congress (O), SSP, Jana Sangh and the Swatantra. The logic of the alliance was the unity of non-Congress parties with a view to challenge its position of power. This logic led to the formation of the Janata Party in 1977. This party was itself a coalition of five erstwhile parties, the Congress (O), the Jana Sangh, Socialist Party, the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD), CFD. This new party was successful in breaking the continuity of the

Congress in power in the Centre for the first time, after the sixth general elections held in 1977. This had the effect of further bringing about substantial changes in the nature of the party system. The position of the Congress party further declined and its organisational structure was further weakened. It was no more capable of integrating varied social groups. Its organisational structure was fast decaying due to lack of inter-party democracy, on the one hand, and its insensitivity towards the changing context of civil society, on the other. Although it was still the only major institution of political bargaining (and the only party capable of capturing power and retaining it in the Centre, at least for another decade), yet its position of power was very precarious.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

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

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

1) What was the outcome of the 1967 elections at the state level?

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2) What was the impact of Congress split on the party politics of India?

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3) What was the major change brought out by the 1977 parliamentary elections?

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19.5 LOSS OF CENTRALITY OF CONGRESS AND EMERGING PARTY SYSTEM

It was in the period starting with the 1989 parliamentary elections that the Congress was displaced from its position of centrality. Such displacement of Congress from the position of the centre has various implications:

1) Firstly, Congress has ceased to be the dominant political party. It is no more the single major political party that dominates the political scenario. A number of other political formations have also had their effective presence. For the last two decades, there has been an ascendance of non-Congress political formations. The major non-Congress formations that have been playing a crucial role in Indian politics include the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Left Parties, and a

number of other national and regional parties. The central political space, earlier dominated by the Congress party, is now being shared by a number of political parties.

- 2) The loss of centrality of the Congress, in another perspective implies a decline in its capacity to represent a consensus. It is no more capable of accommodating varying interests. As the nature of state-society relationship has changed and consequently emerging interests have been sharpened, the societal conflicts and contradictions have become more pronounced. The central space needed for defusing such conflict is not available with the Congress. The traditional methods of co-option or bargaining that helped it to deal with the conflicting interests do not work any more.
- 3) The decline of Congress has not led to the emergence of an alternate national party that could occupy the central space. In other words, the single party dominant system has not been substituted by a two-party system. The rise of the BJP in the early eighties had led some analysts to hope that it might work as an alternate national party and that there might develop a bi-party system with a direct competition of power between the Congress and the BJP. Yet, it could not be possible. While the Congress continued to decline from its position of strength, the BJP could not attain the majority on its own.
- 4) Failure of the large national parties like the Congress and the BJP to get majority of seats in Parliament has brought numerous smaller parties to the central stage of Indian politics. The large parties have been depending upon these smaller parties for the formation of governments. Instead of single party majority governments, we have been having minority coalitions. In 1991, the minority government of Congress was installed [which attained majority subsequently]. The 1996 Parliamentary elections led to the formation of a minority coalition of thirteen parties of the United Front, supported by Congress and the Left Front. This coalition was replaced in 1998 by another coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The 1999 Parliamentary elections again resulted in the coalition government of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with BJP as the largest member of the coalition.

19.6 CONTEMPORARY PARTY SYSTEM

19.6.1 Contemporary Party System – Party System at the Central Level

- 1) The party system as it is operating at present is based upon *multiplicity of political parties*. As already observed, since 1989, there has been a definite increase in the number of political parties entering the political arena. Numerous regional and small parties have filled in the vacuum created by the Congress. The strength of the major national parties has been decreasing and that of the smaller parties has been increasing. The composition of Parliament since 1989 is a reflection of the changed party scenario.
- 2) The kind of the party system that is available at present is not hegemonic but *competitive with sufficient scope for alternation*. However, due to the inability of any single party to attain majority, the alternation takes place not between the individual parties but between the groups of political parties.
- 3) The compulsion of the electoral mathematics and the requirement of coalition governments have resulted in the politics of *alliance*. Alliance takes place among a number of political parties that come together for contesting elections and forming the government.

- 4) The politics of alliance has had a number of consequences for the nature of party politics. The *competitive political space has been widened* with greater number of political parties having a bearing on power politics. Rather than one party hegemonising power (as in case of pre-1967 level of politics), or even two or three parties making serious claims on political power, there are a number of political parties which enter the political arena. As part of the one or the other alliance structure, these numerous political parties have a serious stake in the process of elections and in the formation of government. Politics of alliance, therefore, has its direct consequence on the nature of government. Governance is based upon a *wider dispersal of power* among the alliance partners.
- 5) The nature of alliance to begin with, was simply on the basis of exigencies of power politics. Gradually, over the period a pattern seems to have evolved in this context. Rather than the alliances formed after the election, now there is almost the accepted practice of having pre-poll alliances. Initially, alliances were amorphous with members having come together without any common objectives, except the one related to power. But of late, there has been some kind of effort at drawing some *common minimum programme* acceptable to all partners of the alliance.
- 6) Acceptance of common programme among the alliance partners does not necessarily mean that the alliance partners share common ideology. Ideological cohesiveness, in fact, does not characterize the nature of alliance. Ideological position of the parties that come forward to join an alliance, at times, is quite paradoxical. What causes these ideologically dissimilar parties to form an alliance is the logic of political power. Otherwise, these are *non-ideological political fronts*.
- 7) The politics of alliance has led to the *polarisation of parties*. In the initial years, such polarization took the shape of three alliance structures. Political parties, in the period after 1989 seemed to be organizing themselves around three poles, the one led by the Congress, the second led by the BJP and the Third, which was termed as the Third Front/United Front. The third pole was later weakened. Comprising of the Janata Dal, the Telgu Desam, the Left Parties and many other regional and state parties, it had been successful in forming the government in 1989 but it could not sustain either its unity or its political strength for long time. It was very soon fragmented and its number in the Parliament was substantially reduced. Many of the parties representing the Third Front regrouped around the Congress or the BJP. The way alliances have been formed in last few Parliamentary elections, there has emerged a *bi-polarity*. The Congress and the BJP are the two parties around which varied political parties have been grouped in recent elections.
- 8) The contemporary *party system is a reflection of the complexity and the heterogeneity that prevails with the Indian society*. It is a representation of the diversity of political interests and opinions. It also reflects the wider reach of the participatory politics that has politicized diverse groups and articulated their political voice. This extensive nature of politicization has resulted in an accommodative nature of party politics. The power politics is no more dominated by the big and hegemonic parties. On the contrary, there is sufficient *importance of smaller parties*. As partners in multiparty governance, these small parties have developed their bargaining power. That is the reason that these parties not only share power but also get a voice in the political decision-making. As representatives of diverse groups including those who have been hitherto excluded from power politics and minorities, these smaller parties also help *create more democratic political space*.
- 9) Seen from this perspective, there is a greater *federalised context of party system*. This federalized context has been provided by the complex relation be-

tween the national and the regional party system and signifies assertion of the regional parties, on the other. In the past two decades, a number of regional parties with their focus on regional demands have emerged. These regional parties, besides occupying significant political space at the state level are also playing crucial role in the central politics. It is due to their active presence at the national level of politics, that the party system is really acquiring a federal character. As the national parties are dependent upon the regional parties for the formation of government, the latter have increased their bargaining power. With the result, there has been *mainstreaming of regional parties*. The distinction that existed earlier between the regional and the national party has also been blurred. The National parties have become regional in character and the regional parties are increasingly participatory in national politics and thereby acquiring national stature. The Congress and the BJP, the two national parties, for a long time now, have 'regional' rather than 'national' sphere of influence.

- 10) As the 'national' parties are acquiring regional character, *the regional parties are playing important role in setting the national agenda*. What is more important, the regional demands are being forcefully voiced in the national space of Indian politics. Earlier, this was not possible because the regional demands were placed in opposition to the national demands, and therefore, were considered as a threat to the national unity. With the entry of the regional parties at the national level of politics, this is no more the case. The regional and the federal issues are an important part of the political agenda at the national level of party politics. Region or the regional assertions are no more treated as dangerous for the nation.
- 11) This has important implications for the Indian federal structure. With the shift from the single-centred dominant party system to a multi-party system with lot of space for smaller parties located in the states, there is also a definite shift in the centre-state relations. The emerging party system has an *essential component of partnership between the national, regional and the state level parties*. There is, therefore, a basis for a more egalitarian relationship between the centre and the states. Party system itself is providing the institutional set up for the representation of the interest of the states. Many of the regional parties that are playing important role in party politics have been demanding a reorganisation of the centre-state relationship with greater autonomy for the states. With their ascendance, there has developed greater sensitivity towards the regional issues and there has emerged greater consensus on federalism. Even those national parties that have been traditionally favouring a strong centre have been forced to accept the logic of federalism. The dependence of the BJP on Akalis, DMK, TDP, Trinamul Congress, Samta Party and the National Conference, for instance, has resulted in its flexible attitude towards the issues related to centre-state relations.

19.6.2 Party System at the State Level

The federal context of the party system makes it imperative not only to emphasise the complexity underlying the relation between the national and the state level party system, but also to analyse the nature of party system at the state levels. Although some similarities can be perceived between the national and the state levels of party politics, yet it is important to note that each of the state may be having its own peculiarities.

At the level of the states, there has been, for quite some time, a keen competition for political power. Yet, there are variations in the way this competition operates. In many states, there is an alternation of power between at least two parties. The party

politics, in these states may be described as the two-party politics. In many other states, politics is not neatly divided between the two parties. There is a multiplicity of parties with the parties bunching themselves in two groups/poles. The party politics of these states may be defined in terms of bi-polarity. There are other states also having a multi-party system but which cannot be neatly classified either as two-party system or systems of bipolarity.

There is, therefore, a lot of fluidity in party politics at the state level. This fluidity operates not only in the nature of party competition but also in the way the political parties are placed in the states. Regional parties are important political actors at the level of the states but that does not mean that national parties do not operate at the level of states. There are different patterns of competition between the regional and the national parties. In some of the states, regional parties are very crucial political actors, but in other states, regional parties do not play that important role. There are some states where national parties do not have significant presence. In some states, party competition takes place mainly among the national parties while there are states where the power alternates between a national and a regional party. In some of the states, the national parties have acquired a regional character and compete with the national or the regional parties. Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam, Punjab, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir, are the states with a strong tradition for regional parties, while UP, Himachal Pradesh, MP, Karnataka, Orissa and Rajasthan have been the states where the competition has been taking place between the national parties. Regional parties have also made strong inroads in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

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

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

1) What do we mean by Bi-Polarity in terms of party politics?

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2) Why is the contemporary party politics more representative and more plural?

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3) Why have the regional parties gained more bargaining power?

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4) What is the impact of the contemporary party system on the centre-state relations?

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19.7 LET US SUM UP

The party system in India has undergone major transformation in the last five decades. As a legacy of the National Movement, the Party System in 1947 was characterised by an overwhelming dominance of the Congress party. As the central political institution of India, the Congress completely controlled the power politics for the first two decades after independence. The strength of the Congress lay in its organisational structure and in its ability to accommodate diverse political interests. This peculiarity of the Congress was linked with the homogeneous nature of the political elite whether belonging to the Congress or the opposition.

The party system changed substantially after 1967 with the change in the nature of the socio-economic profile of Indian polity. With the politicisation of the masses as well with the assertion of the new socio-economic groups, mainly the middle peasantry, the backward castes and the Dalits, the party system also changed. The inability of the Congress to accommodate conflicting interests and the erosion of its organisational structure led to its decline. By the end of the 1980s, the Congress had lost its centrality. A multi-party system replaced the Congress System.

The contemporary party system is defined by its multiplicity. A number of national and regional parties have filled in the vacuum created by the withdrawal of Congress from its central position. The regional parties have become more assertive as they have joined the national politics as the allies of the national parties. This also has strengthened the federal structure of India.

19.8 SOME USEFUL BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Morris-Janoes, 'Dominance and Dissent: Their Inter-Relation in the Indian Party System', in Morris-Jones, *Politics Mainly Indian*, Orient Longman, Madras, 1978.

Kothari Rajni, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1970.

Kothari Rajni, 'The "Congress System in India"', in *Party System and Elections Studies*, Occasional Papers of the Centre for Developing Societies, no.1, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1967.

Manor James, 'Parties and the Party System', in Atul Kohli, *India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1988.

Pai Sudha, 'The Indian Party System Under transformation: Lok Sabha Elections 1998'. *Asian Survey*, vol. XXXVIII No.9, Sept. 1998.

19.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) They shared common socio-economic background, i.e., educated, urban, upper middle class belonging to the middle and upper classes.
- 2) Existence of the congress as a dominant party along with a large number of parties.
- 3) They were not able to provide alternative to Congress. Rather they were more parties of pressure.
- 4) It drew support from different state of the society
- 5) It occupied the central position in the party system of India.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Political mobilisation of the masses.
- 2) New groups established their own parties.
- 3) The Janta Dal, the Samajwadi party and the BSP.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) Decline of the Congress and emergency of the competitive politics.
- 2) Decline of the consensual model of Indian politics.
- 3) United the non-congress parties, and further eroded the organisaton of Congress.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

- 1) Polarisation of the party alliances between two major parties — The BJP and the Congress.
- 2) It is more reflective of the heterogeneity in the society.
- 3) Due to the active presence in the national politics
- 4) The regional and federal issues have become an important part of the political agenda.