

Political parties as cornerstones of democratic governance

by

L.C. Jain

Ford Foundation Public Affairs Fellow



public
affairs
centre

Public Affairs Centre,
#15, KIADB Industrial Area
Bommasandra-Jigani Link Road
Bangalore. India. 562106
Telefax (Switchboard): +91-80-27839918/19/20

www.pacindia.org

mail@pacindia.org

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Scope of the Study and Executive Summary

In this paper we examine:

1. the general argument in support of political parties as cornerstones of democratic governance
2. the particular, as they perform in India, with special focus on internal democracy using illustrations from two case studies:
 - One, conducted of all political parties by Lok Satta (the Andhra study)
 - Another in Belgaum, Karnataka, updating Myron Weiner's 1957 study of the Congress Party¹
3. some of the emerging players and recent structural changes in the political system
4. some pointers on the issues and spaces that need attention in the future

The paper examines the role of political parties as cornerstones of democratic governance. The study is based on the premise that political parties are the most crucial pillars for ensuring that the principles of democracy are upheld. They not only offer conduits for the expression of citizens' views, but they also enable varied social and political identities to advocate their interests in the legislatures by promoting effective and responsive leadership.

There are many variations or different ways in which political parties have been birthed or used in the world. Single parties, or one strong monolithic party, have been justified as representing the values and ethos of a liberation movement, an argument developed by Prof Myron Weiner in his treatise on the Congress party, which was further developed by Prof Ashutosh Varshney in 2004 to reveal its application and use in other countries. Other arguments that have been posited justify one party regimes as more suitable to societies built on tribal structures or centered around cultural communities, such as in Uganda. The argument is that in these places multi party systems fan the fires of competition and divides, which are unnatural and destabilizing. However, the landscape that will be examined in this paper is the multiparty democratic system that is prevalent in India, with particular attention paid to its changing character in the last three decades.

An additional premise on which this examination is based is that there is a decline in the internal democracy of Indian political parties. One consequence of this decline is that it has clogged the conduits, ideally offered by the political party as sources of expression for the citizen. This obstruction is reducing the quality of representation, and thereby the quality of Indian democracy.

This assertion is rooted in studies conducted of various political parties. For example, in a study of all the major national Indian parties, using indicators such as elections to office bearers, meetings called of members to discuss issues and views, and other indicators of inner party democracy it was found that no party came out unscathed. (Lok Satta)

This state of affairs stands in stark contrast to the observations made by Professor Weiner in his seminal work conducted in 5 districts of India in the 60's. Prof Weiner had applauded the connection

¹ Myron Weiner, Party Politics in India The Development of a Multi-Party System, New Delhi, 1957

between the District office of the Congress Party and the national office, arguing that the Congress Party's success in representing citizens was due to its integration of the local party with the national party. The district office had strength, power, and resources at its disposal. In 2005 a revisit to one of the Districts that was studied by Prof Weiner, namely Belgaum, found that the District Office of the Congress Party was a forlorn, neglected, two-room office with one person attending to his duties irregularly. Interviews with a politician and other locals, including a journalist, revealed that the office was of no consequence.

In spite of cases like this, political parties continue to exert influence on the Indian governing landscape. What keeps them alive? How has the practice actually challenged the theory?

Political parties are a route to power, which is one reason that they remain prominent features of Indian governance. This is especially true with respect to economic power, a game which is played out at the highest echelons of the power structure. Analysis by journalists such as Harish Khare draw attention to these links, especially as an outcome of economic "reform", i.e. globalisation, liberalisation. Politicians seeking to promote themselves work through the party machine to achieve their goals, which preserves the strength and influence of political parties. Additionally, a study conducted by Sandeep Shastri shows how there is an upturning of representation by the less privileged and formerly politically excluded social groups. These groups are representing a larger percentage of elected representatives than the "higher" castes, and revitalizing the political party by also using it as a route to power.

Another rejuvenating influence for political parties comes from the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, which provided for the creation of new local bodies. These elected local bodies have strengthened the local politician by making him/her responsible for providing the electoral base and vote to the party. These trends are empowering political parties, but they are also challenging them to reevaluate their organizational structures.

We contend that in the modern political context intraparty democracy is not a panacea. A greater level of democracy within political parties has the effect of promoting more responsible and competent leaders. However, intraparty democracy can also impede a party's ability to unify disparate factions within its party, and formulate a coherent platform for the public. In the era of coalitional government, intraparty democracy can also hamper a party's ability to broker "back room" deals, which are essential to maintaining stability and power in government. Therefore, intraparty democracy can be a double-edged sword, and any discussion of political parties should consider both intraparty processes and the outcomes of these processes. Ultimately, social and political forces have revitalized political parties, but the changing political landscape in India has compelled some parties to adopt unhealthy organizational strategies.

In light of these challenges, some ideas suggest themselves as an agenda for action. The constitution, membership, manifestos, annual reports, and work in the legislatures of Political Parties require scrutiny as well as operationalization by encouraging the participation of all members of a party. Simultaneously, civil society organizations and networks, which have been particularly active on electoral reforms and citizen participation in the last few years, need to promote campaigns for mass education, update voter registration, monitor election results (with special attention to the emergence of leadership of women and dalits and representatives of backward areas), and pay attention to the various issues involved with the oversight of elections. In this regard, the election commission has a vital

and synergistic role to play, between the Centre and the States, while reinforcing its interaction with legislatures, at all levels.

India's electoral experience reveals the publics' commitment to participatory democracy, but voters' commitment to democracy should not obscure the fact that the instruments and processes that define democratic governance are in decay. One such significant instrument is the political party. This review or study hopes to emphasize this aspect of democratic governance and make a case for efforts towards its re-vitalization.

I

Place of parties in a democracy

This paper argues that the political party is one of the critical conduits or vehicles for representing the diversity of opinions that exist in a pluralistic society such as India. We believe these conduits and the opportunity to debate differences in the legislatures, at all levels of government, distinguish a democratic system from an authoritarian one.

Furthermore, this paper contends that politics in most countries is inseparable from political parties. In fact, parties exist in many authoritarian societies, albeit as state-sponsored and state patronized parties with limited or no competition. Only some remaining Sultanates and unabashed dictatorships that have prohibited political expression are insulated from the influence that parties exert in the democratic process.² Therefore, it can be safely stated that political parties are indispensable features of the political landscape and are thus unlikely to be discarded. For this reason, democratic reforms within India must be initiated within the party framework if they are to take root in the wider society.

It is worth noting that despite an abundance of literature regarding political parties, there is little theoretical delineation of the conditions under which parties may be able to play a greater role in creating links between social cleavages and the party system. A reason for the lack of research in this area is that the literature on party formation, party system change, and party organization does not explicitly address either the role of the state or associational life.³

Indian political parties are not dissimilar to parties elsewhere as far as their basic pursuit of power is concerned. Ideally speaking, parties are expected to uphold ethical principles and values in public life. Parties are also meant to draw the masses into political activity and perform the function of political socialization, as well as aggregate disparate social groups. Indian political parties are engaged in many, if not all, of these functions, but it is our belief that they can do a better job if they reform themselves from within.

According to experts such as Prof. Pratap B. Mehta, 'Democracy performs its most salient functions through parties' e.g. the selection of candidates, the mobilization of the electorate, the formulation of agendas, the passing of legislation. In most democracies, parties perform crucial educative functions. Political leaders used to accepting the discipline and sanctity of democratic procedures within their own parties, are also less likely to circumvent democracy when in government. Moreover, protracted intra-party primaries have a profound impact on party members. If the party platform is put up for serious contestation within the party, it is more likely that party members will know why their party has taken the positions it has. It is also more likely that the battle within parties will result in a battle of substance rather than a race for patronage.⁴ Parties are, in short, the mechanisms through which democracy is strengthened and power is exercised."

² Political Parties and Indian Democracy – A Lok Satta Discussion Paper, 2-3 December, 2005

³ Pradeep K. Chhibber, *Democracy Without Associations – Transformation of the party system and social cleavages in India*, Vistaar Publication, New Delhi, 1999, Chapter one, *State Structures, Associational Life, and the Social Basis of Party Systems*.

⁴ In Reform political parties first, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 2-3 December, 2005

In India today, we celebrate our democratic system and culture. Indeed, there is some cause for such self-praise, as our electorate exercises its vote brilliantly. However, before we laud ourselves, we must look inside political parties in India, at their internal democracy, and evaluate their capacity to articulate and introduce to the legislatures the voice of diverse interests. This is the third objective of this paper.

This paper argues then, that it is time to put political parties in India under the microscope to better understand the quality of representation they are offering, as well as to determine if they remain as conduits for political expression.

The nature of parties, the ideal and the reality

Pradeep Chhibber illuminates the role of political parties in the Indian socio-political context. The link between social cleavages and party systems in India can be attributed to competition arising from disputes over the policies of an activist state in the absence of associational life. Political parties in India exercise influence because they provide a key link between state and society in the absence of associational life. As a result, political parties have come to play a disproportionately large role in Indian political life. This influence is indeed profound because political parties provide a lens through which we can understand a variety of issues. Diverse analysts have noted that political parties are central to understanding such facets of Indian political life as the problem of governability, ethnic conflict and separatist movements, the implementation of economic policy, and theoretical conceptualizations of the nature of the Indian state and Indian democracy.⁵ Therefore, to understand the nature of conflict and change in the Indian socio-political landscape, it is appropriate to look first at the party system in India.

The transformation of the party system in India is dependent on a particular context that is worth understanding. First, party politics and party systems do not develop outside state structures such as electoral laws, federalism and a state-regulated economy. Second, the relationship of social cleavages to party systems is not axiomatic, as is suggested. Third, parties face a unique dilemma as far as their relationship to their social bases is concerned. If a party relies on an association, as the BJP does on the RSS, it is assured of a degree of support but it cannot adopt policies counter to the interests of its social base. Thus, the BJP's experience indicates that a political base both assists parties in their pursuit of power, but prevents them from voicing diverse perspectives. Catchall parties can draw support from many segments of society, but they can also lose support rapidly, as Congress did in Uttar Pradesh. These conditions place constraints on parties and may be partially responsible for political parties' reluctance to reform.

Ajay Mehra argues that the transformation of the 'core structure' of the party systems in India has not taken place. What actually has happened is that the essential party system has undergone temporary fluctuations. There are changes in the support bases of 'historic parties', an increase in factionalism in the established parties, an increase in the number of splinter parties, an increase in the number of 'relevant parties', and so on. It may, therefore, be appropriate to conclude that there has only been a 'restricted change' in the party systems in India and most of these changes involve the proliferation of parties.⁶

⁵ Pradeep K. Chhibber, *Democracy Without Associations – Transformation of the party system and social cleavages in India*, Vistaar Publication, New Delhi, 1999, in Ch 8

⁶ Ajay K Mehra, D.D. Khanna, Gert W. Kueck, *Introduction*, Political Parties and Party Systems, 2003

Furthermore, as Anthony Downs describes, most members join parties “solely in order to attain the income, prestige, and power which come from being in office”. In order to attain these ends, politicians are likely to advocate policies that serve their interests. This mercantile approach to politics and parties has devastating ramifications for the polity and renders most parties indistinguishable from the mainstream.

We believe that it is first essential to understand this context in order to devise useful strategies for overcoming the shortcomings of political parties.

State of India's Political System and Political Parties

In “Making the Party System in India Work”, Ramashray Roy, holds that: What is also important. . . is the question of how these changes, whether external or internal—that is, changes as reflected in the structural properties of political parties – help or hinder the vitality and vigour of the political system installed to protect and promote the well-being of the people. This means that it is necessary, first, to locate political parties in the larger context of the character of the political system that India has adopted as befitting to its genius and aspirations as well as the purposes for which it has been adopted. In view of this consideration, it becomes necessary to explore a set of three factors impinging on the question of how to re-form political parties so that they can play their role in a way that promotes good governance as a precondition for realizing the goal of development informed by social justice. These factors are: (1) the place and role of political parties in the adopted system of governance; (2) factors associated with the emergence of a multi-party system; and (3) the structural properties of political parties.⁷ We will discuss these three factors, and then explore the consequences of reforming India's political parties.

Parties and the political landscape have undergone transformation in some areas since independence, but the core structure of parties has remained essentially the same. With the metamorphosis of the old parties, and in some cases their decline, demise or reincarnation, and the emergence of a large number of significant new parties, the political landscape and the party system has changed beyond comparison between what it was in the middle of the 20th century and what it is now. Of the 50 parties that are now recognized as National and State parties, 44 have been founded after Independence. From a time when the political scientists and commentators had worked out theories of one-party dominance or felt anxious about the conduciveness of such a party system for democracy to blossom, we have now reached a situation where too many parties stampede and jostle for space in the party domain. Some see it as a natural, if not desirable, development due to the dynamics of the world's most populous democracy marked by great diversity, cultural pluralism and economic underdevelopment. Others see in it fragmentation and decay of the polity, and apprehend a danger to democracy, to the unity of the country and the stability of governments.

⁷ Ramashray Roy, *Making the Party System in India Work*, Ed., V. A. Pai Panandiker and Subhash C. Kashyap, in *Political Reforms: Asserting Civic Sovereignty*, Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 2001

Table 1: Number of parties recognized, participated in the Lok Sabha elections and represented in the Lok Sabha after Independence

Year	Participated in the election	Recognised parties			Represented	With at least 10 seats	With at least 1% vote share
		National	State	Total			
1952	53	14	39	53	22	3	10
1957	15	4	11	15	12	3	6
1962	27	5	11	17	20	5	8
1967	25	7	14	21	18	8	9
1971	53	8	17	25	24	7	11
1977	34	5	15	20	18	4	8
1980	36	6	19	25	17	7	8
1984	33	7	17	24	21	5	12
1989	113	8	20	28	24	6	10
1991	145	9	28	37	24	7	10
1996	209	8	30	38	28	11	13
1998	176	7	30	37	39	8	16
1999	169	7	40	47	38	11	15
2004	230	6	36	42	40	10	15

[Source: Data Unit, Lokniti-CSDS, Delhi]

The initial success of parties is undeniable. They were instrumental in mediating between various agencies and competing interests; they brought government closer to the people; they displayed ideological flexibility; they gravitated towards the center (thus encouraging ideological stability and cohesion); and they facilitated more effective representation of previously marginalized groups through a process of social balancing.

However, the initial success of political parties in these areas has given way to political bickering and unrestrained factionalism. In fact, many of the positive facets of political parties are now working against their success. For example, the overzealous advocating of nationalism, secularism, and socialism has placed an overwhelming burden on political parties, as they seek to negotiate their resources between competing interests. In an era of libertarian democracy and globalization, the most daunting obstacles, identified by many political observers, to healthy party functioning are populism, paternalism, corruption, and criminality. How then do political parties "clean house", while addressing external issues which are of equal or greater importance. This is the tension that political parties are currently dealing with, and the manner in which they resolve this tension has consequences for democracy in India. Therefore, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the sources of this tension and see where the system can be rectified.

Political parties in India today have multiple obligations to attend to. They must resolve the emergent tensions emanating in society due to rapid democratization; manage policy changes in the environment of liberation without giving up the Constitutional commitment to equality and justice; forge coalitions and learn to share power; and reform themselves to meet the demands of the public and deliver on the promise of democracy. Political parties have responded to these challenges by taking the

path of least resistance. They have transformed their parties from grass-roots organizations to highly centralized and hierarchical structures. We believe that the new centralized model that several parties have adopted is counterproductive to democracy, and results in poorer representation.

Although political parties are indispensable features of the Indian political landscape, they must reform from within if they are to remain relevant. It seems that the moment is ripe for reform and Indians of all political and religious persuasions are demanding that parties take action to reform themselves. "Introspection among party leaders and their willingness to set things right within the party, the ability of people to bring pressure on parties and to choose right leaders, initiatives from the EC and the judiciary, and external legislation that ensures internal democracy in parties, are crucial to making both parties and Indian democracy strong and vibrant."

It is evident that democratic governance, as envisaged in the Constitution, can operate only with the aid of political parties. The health of the political parties is thus not a private matter, but one of serious concern to the common man. Yet, most of Indian political parties are like a closed box. Their inner working is shielded from the public eye.

The current state of affairs is linked to the evolution of political parties in India. Era Sezhiyan documents this evolution in his book *Political Parties in Federal India*":

"Let us consider the role and functioning of the political parties in the federal India. The Constitution as given by the Constituent Assembly in 1951 did not contain words 'federalism' and 'parties' anywhere in it. Till the inclusion of the Tenth Schedule by the Constitution (52nd Amendment) Act 1985, there was no reference to political parties in the Constitution. The said Amendment was for disqualification of Members of Parliament on ground of defection. Otherwise, the Constitution provides for election of Members of legislatures and formation of governments at the Centre and in the States, without any reference to the political parties. It is quite possible even now for 543 independent Members to be elected to the house of the people and to enable them to assist in formation of a Government without any party affiliation."

After the 1967 general elections, the situation changed when different political parties came to power in a number of States. This trend reached its peak in 1997 when the Janata Front displaced the Congress at the Centre. Since 1989 no single party has been successful in the elections to command absolute majority in the House of the People; the result being that the State parties have begun to play a major role in forming alliances and coalitions, before or after the election, in conjunction with the formation of the governments at the Centre. Our hypothesis is that forming coalitions and alliances in government, and managing increasing diversity within the parties, has convinced many parties that grass-roots organizational structures are outdated. Thus, recognition and acceptance of the federal units and the regional parties are significant in national politics and in the formation and maintenance of coalition governments. Yet, this underlying dynamic, which is essential to a healthy democracy, is often disregarded by party leaders, who try to manage diversity within the party by exerting unilateral control over the party. Moreover, because of the sheer number of panchayats, there is a mammoth concentration of power in the hands of the party president, without whose permission no party-member can get the party support in an election. Selection of candidates is often described as 'distribution of tickets', by the party leader.

This brings out a basic contradiction in Indian politics. The country has a federal Constitution, whereas the parties participating in the elections and working within the federal system of governance are highly centralized in organization, functioning, and delegation of authority. Indian political parties are Dr. Jekyll in public appearance and Mr. Hyde in terms of party management!

Furthermore, the party leader in India dictates the conduct of his party members in legislature through the issue of whips (and directives in voting) on the motions in the legislature. The Members are also directed to vote in accordance with the party whip in the elections to the State Legislative Council and to the Rajya Sabha, as well as for the posts of President and Vice-President, etc. Under the anti-defection law, any member who does not obey the 'whipocracy' of the party is labeled a defector and is liable to be disqualified from being a Member of the House. It should also be noted that under the Indian system a member set up by a particular party and elected cannot change his party unless he resigns his membership and obtains a fresh mandate from the electorate. The scope of the anti-defection law should be restricted to cases involving voluntary resignation and violation of party whips only during a vote of confidence, money bills and vote of thanks to the President.

India's current system contrasts with the freedom enjoyed both in the United State and the UK, where an elected Member is free to vote without compulsion by the party and/or punishment under the law. In the UK, the Members may be allowed to debate and vote freely, except in the case of a confidence or no-confidence motion before the House affecting the stability of his/her party in government.

In his Narla Memorial Endowment lecture, Jayaprakash Narayan, coordinator, Loksatta, provided insight into the working of Indian political parties: "Over the years the internal functioning of the political parties has become highly autocratic, oligarchic, unaccountable and undemocratic. At times they have become hereditary fiefdoms of oligarchies/dictatorial leaders. Nomination cultures, role of muscle and money power, intolerance of dissent and arbitrary decision-making have become the order of the day. Any potential dissidence or principled opposition is instantly snuffed out. Suspension, expulsion, instant removal from office, denial of party tickets; all these and many other devices are employed by the 'High Command' to put down dissent and even mild opposition. Leadership is bequeathed largely by heredity. In the process the parties tended to become hereditary and dynastic in nature and operation. Organizational elections are rarely held. (Congress conducted its organisational elections only once in the last four decades. Even that was later countermanded arbitrarily by the President of the party). All positions in the regional and local units are filled by nomination by the party leader. Even routine functioning is carried on in tune with the whims and fancies of the 'High Command', which itself is a euphemism for the big leader, the President of the party. Myths and images are assiduously propagated to perpetuate personal power of the leader. No other party leader/ functionary is allowed to share the limelight. The moment a local / regional/ national leader gains a measure of popularity, he is seen as a potential rival and cut down to size or removed from office/ packed off to political wilderness by the coterie of psychopants / hangers on, who become a wall of separation between big leader and the party members big and small."⁸

⁸ Jayaprakash Narayan.N, Political parties and Indian Democracy, Narla Memorial Endowment Lecture, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University (Hyderabad 1998) as cited by K. Venugopala Rao and Pramod Kumar Mohanty in Internal Democracy of Political Parties: A case study of Four Major Parties in AP, 2000

Speaking at the National Symposium on 'Re-Orienting Federalism' on December 3, 1996 in Chennai, Mr. C. Subramaniam, stated his views even more firmly and criticized the anachronistic centralization of power by the party leaders: "The first step in the re-engineering is for party high commands at the national levels not to continue to look upon themselves as the unchallengeable czars or dictators, imposing their will and judgment on the constituent units without permitting them to act in the discretion suited to local circumstances and requirements...It is idle to talk of decentralization or devolution without discarding the anachronisms of an earlier era. The party headquarters should transform their role from being one of authoritarian Know-Alls, handing down standardized prescriptions for the variegated mosaic of the polyglot polity that is India, to that of a catalyst, coordinator, umpire and guide, leaving the constituent units which are closer to ground realities to take decisions in their best judgement in time with those realities and as per non-mandatory guidelines or codes formulated at the national level. Thereby, the principle of acting locally and thinking nationally will come into play in the management of political parties."⁹

Mr. Subramaniam's recommendations seem most appropriate in light of the fact that despite the leadership of the dominant national parties exerting rigid control in India, they remain ineffective in many cases. For example, national parties could not solve inter-state disputes in cases of demarcation of State boundaries, sharing of river water, location of capital city, etc. The interests and constitutional rights of a State have been defended by the combined meeting of the state units and leaders cutting across party affiliations at the national level, which is all the more reason for the national parties to not intrude into local matters.

Initiating Change: Where to Look for Weaknesses

Having addressed the first two factors in previous sections, this paper will now address the third factor affecting the reformation of political parties, which are their structural properties. There is currently a fashionable view that India's diversity will necessarily entail a large number of political parties and that these parties will in turn reflect a diversity of opinions. The misperceived correlation between more parties and greater diversity is an assumption that warrants further examination. There are many political parties and a good deal of social diversity. But it is too quick to assume that one causes the other. Indeed, the internal organizational weaknesses of the political parties make Indian democracy less effective.

Furthermore, internal weaknesses stifle ideological diversity and result in monolithic parties that are not necessarily representative of their constituents' interests. This lack of intra-party democracy and diversity of opinions produces adverse outcomes for Indian democracy. The criteria for the basic decisions any party has to take, ranging from candidate selection to party platform, remain either unclear or are left to the discretion of one or a handful of leaders. The more that discretionary power is vested with leaders, the more a political party will depend solely on its leaders for renewal.

Today, "The fragmentation of the party system and the prospect of perpetual coalition governments; the weakening of democratic accountability despite high turnover of incumbents; the fact that political parties are unable to transcend their narrow social bases and become parties of principle;

⁹ C. Subramaniam, Hand of Destiny, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1993 as cited by Era Sezhian, in Political Parties in Federal India, Mainstream, August 13, 2005

the diminishing quality of public deliberation in our politics – all have their roots, less in the failure of the Constitution than in the party structures that have grown under it. These outcomes are, to a considerable degree, produced by poor institutionalization of intra-party democracy.

Most, if not all, parties are in internal disarray because they are lacking institutional devices for resolving central debates, and the consequences of this disarray are that representative democracy is being undermined. The reasons for the lack of proper intra-party democracy are not hard to understand. “Parties are endogenous institutions that adopt certain norms and procedures. The question is under what conditions do parties choose to create democratic rules and procedures in the first place?” The answer to this question depends on whether or not one is looking at party organization in terms of processes or outcomes. According to Professor Susan Scarrow,

Those who emphasize the participatory aspects of democracy place the most value on intra-party democracy as an end in itself. They see parties not primarily as intermediaries, but rather as incubators that nurture citizens’ political competence. To fulfill this role, parties’ decisionmaking structures and processes should provide opportunities for individual citizens to influence the choices that parties offer to voters. These opportunities will help citizens expand their civic skills, and inclusive processes can boost the legitimacy of the alternatives they produce. In this way, party institutions can perform useful educative functions while also transferring power to a broader sector of society. This is a powerful view, one that differs from what is sometimes called the “responsible party” view of government. In this alternative model, parties’ essential contribution to democracy is to offer clear and distinct electoral choices so that voters can give their representatives a mandate by which to govern, and can subsequently hold them accountable if they fail to deliver on promises. From this outcome-oriented perspective, parties’ organizational structures should be judged above all in terms of how well they help the parties choose policies and personnel that reflect the preferences of their broader electorates.

A brief look at India’s parties will indicate that parties in India are failing on both counts. They have neither adopted organizational structures that favor democratic processes, nor are they responding to their constituent’s demands by promoting more qualified and competent candidates.

II

A peep at India's Parties

The most comprehensive study of internal democracy in political parties in Andhra was conducted by K. Venugopal.¹⁰ The study covered structural/functional aspects of 4 major political parties in Andhra Pradesh including, Congress (I), TDP, BJP and CPI (M). The functioning of structures within these parties has been analyzed using four primary avenues of research. 1) The formation of committees and elections to the executive bodies of these committees vis - a - vis their status as per the party constitutions has been examined. 2) The actual process of enrollment and renewal of membership has been described. 3) The procedures of training members of the parties and their interface with the public have been highlighted. 4) Methods of selection and funding have also been probed? The study has also delved into several other aspects such as leadership choices, spread of ideology among the cadres along with their willingness to implement their own manifestoes. The study reveals that all the four parties are essentially centralised and not as democratic as would appear to the common observer. In many respects, they do not comply with their own constitutions.

A Brief Look at the Study's Findings

The study of Congress (I) suggests, "that it will have to undertake a thorough overhaul of its organizational set up if it wants to rejuvenate itself. Congress has to bid adieu to the top-down style of functioning and transform itself into a bottom-up organization."

Regarding TDP, the study shows "that election to party posts becomes unanimous in most instances owing to the intervention of senior leaders. There is a need to allow the party cadres a freehand in this regard. The study points out that methods of selection of party nominees to elected public offices should be made more transparent and democratic by involving party cadres and allowing less room for maneuvering and manipulation by senior leaders, the party president in particular. The party is highly centralized in funding matters."

Findings on BJP show "that the party needs more decentralized procedures for the selection of party candidates to elected public bodies, and more intensive and transparent involvement of the party cadres. Likewise, BJP should allow its members to freely elect their leadership instead of presenting a preference for unanimous choice through the intervention of senior party leaders. BJP needs to publicize its membership rolls and make them easily accessible to the public. Availability of the party constitution needs to be more widespread."

Findings on CPI (M) show "that it needs to make its secret membership rolls public. Party leaders need to be less dictatorial in party matters and allow more involvement of cadres in decision making, in organisational elections, in selection of candidates to public offices etc."

In short, "The personalised party behaviour needs to be changed to an institutionalised behavioral pattern," thus making the party a functioning institution.

¹⁰ K. Venugopala Rao and Pramod Kumar Mohanty, "Internal Democracy of political parties: A case study of four major parties in AP, 4th March 2000

The text of the Venugopal study is included in Volume Two: Related Documents (No. 6a)

To reiterate, political parties constitute one of the corner stones of democracy. They are the means by which we measure state democracy and act as legitimate players of politics in a state. They perform the crucial function of expressing people's will, and provide legitimacy to the political institutions and their actions. However, all this is possible only if the political parties are transparent/ internally democratic.

The INC: A Closer Look

This paper takes a more in depth look at the Indian National Congress in Belgaum in Karnataka. Belgaum was chosen because of the availability of an acknowledged benchmark study of INC conducted by Myron Weiner nearly 40 years ago. Since this study was conducted, two political scientists have visited Belgaum in 2005. The text of this study is included in the volume: Related Documents (No. 7). Here are the main conclusions of this study¹¹:

"Belgaum: practically all but one person interviewed agreed that internal democracy was being eroded in the party, especially since 1979 during the Devaraj Urs regime, and that today the party meant, not the organisation but the MLAs, MPs and Ministers belonging to the district. We shall later on deal with the one dissenting voice. Even the dissenter, as we shall see, made statements contradicting his own assertion. That the party has lost its institutional identity was reinforced by the very physical state of the party office. The party office consisted of two non-descript rooms with no furniture. The party had no library, though it received newspapers, which were read by stray party workers. There were no paid staff, and there was no systematic record keeping. There was no research or public relations wing. An assistant to the DCC secretary sat in the office, and he did not seem to have kept any regular hours. The party office looked forlorn and forsaken. In short, the party did not seem to have any physical identity.

A very resourceful journalist we interviewed pointed out that the party had not lost its image as a common man's party as against its rivals. He gave an example to make the point. This related to an ordinary cobbler, literally working by the roadside, being picked up by the party. The journalist pointed out that only in the party could an ordinary cobbler manage to become an MLA and eventually a Minister. The same journalist also pointed to the paradox of being a party of the poor and the rich simultaneously. He told us how the parties promoted interests of rich and powerful lobbies like the lobby representing the owners and directors of sugar factories and the education lobby represented by organisations like the KLE society. Showing remarkable political insight he argued that in these cases it was not the lobbies who controlled the party, and that the party was an indispensable instrument they relied on to protect and promote their interests. In academic terms, it was a case of politics promoting economics and not economics promoting politics. What this amounted to was saying that politics was a means towards economic aggrandizement. People entered politics to skim off economic benefits.

¹¹ Party Democracy and De-Institutionalization: A case study of Belgaum district Congress' by Dr. K Raghavendra Rao

Before, we move away from this case study of Belgaum, we draw attention to a recent volume of essays in memory of Myron Weiner, which has reflected on Weiner's propositions.¹² "One of Myron Weiner's major contributions to political science was his analysis of the sources of strength of the one-party dominant political system, as exemplified by the Congress party under Nehru. Before his study it was generally understood that nationalist movements in the newly emerging states could readily exploit their anti-colonial credentials and thereby claim to embody the spirit of the new nation. However, Weiner's interpretation went beyond this traditionally accepted explanation by analyzing the strength of the Indian National Congress' organizational structure. "In the spirit of a dedicated field researcher, (Weiner) adopted a straightforward empirical approach of analyzing in great detail the operations of the Congress party at the district level in five different states. He found that Congress had deep and stout roots because the local organizations were committed to recruiting and training new members, and even more important, the local party bosses understood the needs and interests of the people of the district. They were thus able to champion the people's immediate concerns even while responding to the national policies of the central authorities (Weiner, 1967).

"Although Weiner's focus was on the strengths of the Congress party, his findings were later to provide a ready explanation for the decline of Congress when Indira Gandhi broke with those established arrangements and sought to by-pass the party bosses at the state and district levels and to manage the entire party from the centre. The stresses and strains that the local bosses had successfully dealt with through various trade-offs and patronage arrangements were now directed to the top leadership without any tempering or modifying influences. What had been diffused at the local level by knowledgeable and skilled local leaders were now irreconcilable, zero-sum confrontations at the national level (Hansen, 1999; Varshney, 1998).

Furthermore, "Weiner's in-depth analysis of the Congress party at the local level also provided us with a basis for distinguishing those one-party dominant systems that could legitimately be considered democratic and those that were essentially authoritarian in nature. The difference lies very much in the relationship of the centre to the locality. Where there was considerable in-put from the local party officials the system could be appropriately classed as democratic, as was the case in India before Mrs. Gandhi made her move to grab power and to employ emergency rule." In contrast, the deterioration of the Congress party's office in Belgaum is merely a reflection of the overarching systemic problems that now plague the Congress party. These are problems that can be attributed to the adoption of anti-democratic measures during the Indira Gandhi years. Although the focus of this paper is on the lack of intraparty democracy within Indian political parties, we would be remiss to exclude other factors that are undermining our hopes for a more equitable society.

Impact of globalisation on the Indian polity

Political commentator Harish Khare¹³ highlights the sources and nature of shifts that are taking place in India's economic life, changes which will inevitably have an impact on the political arena. In the first 35 years under the constitution, a conscious effort was made, regardless of success, to inject a modicum of egalitarianism in the economic order. While entrepreneurs were given the opportunity to move forward on their operations, these operations were not entirely unregulated from the relative

¹² India and the Politics of Developing Countries, Essays in Memory of Myron Weiner, Edited by Ashutosh Varshney, Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., New Delhi, 2004

¹³ Harish Khare, **Mediating Economic Reforms, Ed.**, by Ajay K. Mehra, DDKhanna & Gert W. Kueck, **Political Parties and Party Systems, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2003**

viewpoint of public policy or public interest. The regulations may have been inadequate, considering the fact that inspite of the licensing system, huge industrial empires have grown in the country. Be that as it may, the trend towards globalization has benefited the 'liberated' economic segment of society. Those who have reached a degree of economic stability now have the opportunity to climb the economic ladder to great heights. Unfortunately, globalization has not provided the same opportunities for the economically disadvantaged segments of society. Thus, the divide between the rich and the poor has widened. It has exacerbated the plight of the poor by isolating them from modernity.

At the ground level, the political arena is experiencing a resurgence of dispossessed groups like the Dalits and others who are in revolt against social oppression. Currently, they are speaking out and stamping the ballot papers in sufficient numbers to make their presence felt in the political institutional forums - the Parliament, the State Assemblies and also the Panchayat Raj Institutions and Municipalities. The extent to which the poor make inroads into India's modernizing economy and political institutions, and the effect that these inroads will have on alleviating poverty, are matters of serious enquiry. Stability in one sphere alone - either economic or political - is not sufficient to ensure overall stability.

Political Corruption

Former MP, G Viswanathan, underscores related issues, including political corruption.¹⁴ "Is democracy safe in India with the multiparty system, malpractices, violence in elections, and shaky Coalition Governments? Unless, effective reforms in the political arena are ensured, economic reforms cannot be continued and sustained. Hence, there is a need to deliberate about the changes that have to be brought about in the functioning of political parties, which intermediate between the people and the government. Recently, Gallup International conducted a Survey in 60 countries to find out the views of people about their political leaders. According to the survey, globally political leaders were viewed as "DISHONEST" by 63% of those surveyed and as UNETHICAL by 52%. The view on 'DISHONEST' was highest in Asia (73%), Africa (82%) and Latin America (87%). India is not lagging far behind."¹⁵

Funding of elections

In the early 90's when South Africa became free and opted for a democratic parliament based on adult franchise, the great leader Mr. Nelson Mandela opined that 'If the elections are not for private but public purpose, the public (State) should pay for it and not allow private expenditure'. There cannot be two opinions on this issue.

In India today, private expenditure is wreaking havoc and destroying the very fabric of democracy by breeding corruption. This issue cannot be swept under the carpet because the consequences of concealing corruption are indeed dire.

Democracy is dependant on political parties if it is to remain viable. In recent times the Goswami Committee, the Indrajit Gupta Committee, and the Law Commission have held serious discussions about the role of private expenditure (money spent by candidates) in elections and have

¹⁴ Shri G Viswanathan, Chancellor, VIT in his Presidential Address at "National Symposium on Political Reforms in India" at Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore on 28 January 2005.

¹⁵ National Symposium on Political Reforms in India, VIT (Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, January 28-29, 2005

made certain suggestions regarding this subject. One suggestion is for partial state funding of certain candidates and to set limits on expenditure in accordance with the price index. However, both suggestions are inadequate and are unlikely to bring about the necessary changes.

The solution lies in the complete prohibition of private funding in elections to the legislatures, and a simultaneous and comprehensive adoption of state funding. We should not be deterred by the operational details of such a policy because those can be worked out by experts. However, we should be deeply concerned about the corrupting influence of private money in public elections. It seems the mild inconveniences associated with transitioning from private to public funding pale in comparison to the costs associated with doing nothing about this growing problem.

Just consider the corollary findings and concerns, highlighted in a recent PAC paper: Holding a Mirror to the New Lok Sabha (2004): (Related document attached), on the issue of corruption:

- ☛ Money is truly a barrier to entry in the political arena. The average assets of an MP is Rs. 1.64 crores (\$366000), and a majority of MPs are multimillionaires. There are variations among political parties, with the Indian National Congress leading the pack in terms of asset power. The two communist parties are at the other end of the spectrum.
- ☛ The study's findings have important policy implications. They provide a strong case for the reform of the norms and conduct of political parties; they signal the need for greater transparency of information to empower citizens; and they provide a basis for a closer look at the financing of election campaigns.¹⁶

Indeed, the disturbing implications of this phenomenon have been highlighted by many over the years. It is known that much of private funding is unaccounted black money, money that should legally have been accounted for by the treasury. Instead, this money, which should have landed in the treasury, is being siphoned off to fund political campaigns, thereby elevating criminals to positions of power where they have the potential to abuse their authority in the pursuit of nefarious activities. The issues involved go beyond funding. For example, Madhav Godbole¹⁷ presents a comprehensive review of issues and suggestions. He sees "merit in incorporating 'a proper and sustainable framework' for political parties in the Constitution in accord with Article 21 of the German Basic Law. Considering the proliferation of political parties, the disintegration and degeneration of the Congress as a catch-all party, and the failure of any other party to rise to that status, Godbole underlines the need for 'a proper Constitutional and legislative framework' to deal with emerging distortions both in the electoral framework and the organizational framework of the parties."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh acknowledged the gravity of the situation and called for a national consensus to ensure greater transparency in the financing of political parties and election spending.¹⁸ Observing that the funding of political parties was a major avenue for the funneling of black money, Singh said that issues like state funding of elections should be placed on the national agenda so as to

¹⁶ Samuel Paul and M. Vivekananda, *Holding A Mirror to the New Lok Sabha*, Bangalore

¹⁷ Madhav Godbole, *The Electoral Framework, Process and Political Parties*, Ed., by Ajay K. Mehra, D.D. Khanna & Gert W. Kueck, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2003

¹⁸ *The New Sunday Express*, February 13, 2005

tackle corruption in politics. This sort of solution should serve merely as a stopgap along the path to more substantive reforms.

This same issue was also considered by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution - NCRWC (Annexure V).

Although many parties are decaying due to a lack of intraparty democracy, there are some positive political developments. This last section of the paper will explore some of these developments and identify several initiatives that can buttress democratic structures and institutions in India.

III

Some promising developments in India

Radicalisation of the base of Indian democracy

The most striking phenomenon that has surfaced is the unprecedented process of radicalization of the polity at the base. What is meant by radicalising the base of democracy? The answer is provided by Sandeep Shastri's thought provoking paper: 'Local democracy and political parties'¹⁹. Shastri's paper includes a seemingly innocuous table:

Representation to Different Castes in Karnataka Legislative Assembly and Local Bodies:

Caste	Percentage of State Population	Percentage of Seats Won in the Assembly (1994)	Percentage of Seats Won in the Local Bodies (1994-95)
Lingayat	15.3	28.57	17.0
Vokkaliga	10.8	24.11	16.0
Brahmin	3.5	4.46	2.5
Scheduled Caste	16.7	15.63	15.3
Scheduled Tribe	6.7	2.68	7.0
Kuruba	3.6	4.46	7.5
Other OBC's	29.1	17.41	29.5
Minority	14.3	2.68	5.2
	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: For Legislature: Shastri, *Towards Explaining the Voters Mandate*, Bangalore; Vinayaka, 1994, pp. 54-57; Shastri, 'Twilight of Congress Hegemony: Emergence of a Bi-Polar Alliance System in Karnataka', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Aug-Sept 1999, 34; 34-35, pp. 2440-48. For Local Bodies: Subha K., *Karnataka Panchayat Elections, 1995*, New Delhi: Concept, 1997: 71.

As the table shows, a revolutionary upturning is taking place in the democratic base. It is ushering in unprecedented changes of social significance. There is promise that these changes are likely to solidify as they are anchored to an institutional platform that must be developed by political parties. Shastri refers to the dislodging impact of Panchayat elections (unleashed by the 73rd Constitution Amendment of 1992) on the entrenched power of two dominant communities, namely the Lingayats and Vokkaligas in the political landscape of Karnataka. Though the two communities have only a 26 percent presence in the state population, in the past they always managed to capture and occupy a disproportionately higher number of seats in the Assembly. Often the combined number of seats annexed by them was twice their proportionate presence in the population.

For instance, in the 1994 State Assembly elections the proportion of seats they captured was 54 percent of the total seats in the State Assembly against their strength of only 26 percent in the State population. Coincidentally, at around the same time (in 1994-95) there were also elections in Karnataka to the panchayats – first time as per the 73rd Amendment. In that Panchayat election, the percentage share of total seats won by the Lingayats and Vokkaligas combined dwindled sharply from 54 percent in

the Assembly to 33 percent in the panchayat, closer to their ratio in the population. The main reason for this decline in their share of seats is that in Panchayats there is a statutory reservation of elective seats for the disadvantaged sections – the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Hitherto, one saw the potential of such reservations in theory, but here at last the intent actualized. The seemingly unassailable dominance of these two higher castes –lingayats and vokkaligas, was achievable via the panchayat electoral process which, though not revolutionary, demonstrated its radical potential. It shows the power of local elections to affect socially and politically radical structural changes. This is a message of profound import that transcends the boundaries of Karnataka because the statutory reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in Panchayats apply to all of India. These changes and trends are thus not accidental. They are likely to endure in our political-social base. It marks an end to stagnant historicity and weakens political pundit's frequent assertion that in the present electoral system the weak were not likely to inherit the earth. It is evident that without this radical structural change in the democratic base, set off by panchayat elections, the Indian polity would have in fact continued to nurse status quo. Of course, social upturning is not a socio-political phenomenon that has transformed the political landscape of all regions in India. In Bihar, this process has undulated and failed to produce a stable platform for reform, the result being that there is no discernible difference in Bihar politics. Moreover, the radicalization of the democratic base has also reignited casteism, stemming from controversial reservations for OBCs and dalits in education, employment, and promotions.

Nevertheless, a broader view of this phenomenon would show that the institutionalized and relatively more equitable redistribution of political power is essentially a constructive, purposive, and dynamic convulsion. Contrary to a common misperception, it is not the source of instability or trouble in our polity. Rather, it is addressing the sources of trouble which have gotten entrenched overtime and come to be mistaken for stability. These problems have been neglected to the fact that each poll season we have been looking mainly at the aggregate electoral miracle, drawing comfort from the fact that the polity is well and secure at the hands of the masses. Analysis similar to that done by Shastri for Karnataka, i.e. the representational profile of various sections of society in the population vs. their representation in the seats of political power, namely Assembly and Panchayats in the respective States, could not be obtained for other states for this study, but needs to be assembled regularly. This sort of analysis would help overcome the false sense of security that we have taken in traditional measures of democracy by actually evaluating the political system's ability to promote representative government.

The emerging political-social developments in the panchayat sphere are bound to have a welcome impact on the political parties. According to Shastri; "we must consider the impact of the establishment of a third tier of elective offices, the Panchayats, on renewal processes in the party system. The forces set in motion by the 73rd Amendment could act as a powerful impetus to renewal and reform. Innovations such as reservation of seats for women and the need for party cadres to campaign and contest in third tier elections are factors which would gradually impact party organizations at all levels. They impart a new dimension to federal democracy by vastly increasing the number of elective offices on offer. In the long run they can act as agents of renewal of parties through the induction of more active members in party organizations. However, this outcome would depend greatly on the extent to which intra-party democracy is allowed to develop and flourish. The track record of most parties is extremely patchy in this regard." At the very least, the sheer number of panchayats is likely to reinforce grass-roots political activity, which could in turn place pressure on parties to reform.

Women in panchayats are of course not depending entirely on the arrival of intra party democracy to give them space. They have acquired experience and self-confidence and are creating a place for themselves. Sharada Muralidharan, of the Indian Administrative Service, provides a view of development in Kerala: ²⁰

The state planning board of Kerala had done a comparative assessment of the self perceptions of women representatives when they were newcomers into governance and four years later when they had experienced the twists and turns of administration. The contrast in the confidence levels of the women representatives was phenomenal. From a starting scenario of confidence levels of 20 to 30%, the proportion of women who felt they had the requisite skills of public speaking, knowledge of laws and procedures, control over officials and ability to intervene in the statutory committees shot up to 70 to 80%. There has also been a tendency for women who have done well in their first stint as elected representatives to contest in open seats as well.

Women who have acquired political and administrative experience through the panchayat raj institutions have slowly begun to enter their parent political parties, if only because of the expediency of having candidates, who have the potential of winning contested seats.

Even the women who are unable to contest elections because of the rotations of reserved constituencies try to retain the political identity they have created for themselves, and seek space for intervention.

It is also necessary, however, to note the limitations of what is happening through the panchayat electoral sphere at the grassroots level, which may delay fuller realization of the gains from radicalization. For instance, the recent changes in the electoral sphere have not yet affected the tightly controlled and centralised command structure of the political parties. That still remains in tact. Data presented by Shastri for Karnataka helps to recognise that the super structure at the top of most of our political parties – which continue to control and determine the choice and nomination of legislative candidates - remain insulated by the storm gathering at the grassroots level - in the panchayat electoral sphere. Thus, effective political power and decision-making in the political parties remains concentrated in fewer hands. Often these hands are mainly from communities who are otherwise being dislodged, as noticed, at the grassroots level by panchayat elections. It is a non-ideal situation for a democratic polity based on adult-franchise. It is certain that over time cracks are bound to develop in this 'command' crust, enabling the gains from radicalization to spread evenly across our political landscape. We have pointed towards some sources of pressure that may change this command structure, but the future of political party organization has yet to manifest itself.

To reiterate, it is the functioning of political parties, which can strengthen or undermine democracy in a country. Thus, the inner-party democracy makes a difference in maintaining transparency in public life, and the manner in which candidates are nominated to various legislatures and parliament will indicate what kind of people are being sent into the legislative bodies. Another set of complications that are inherent to the political process is that there is a relatively high turnover of top-level officials and governments, resulting from outdated procedures.

²⁰ Sharada Muralidharan, "The significance of panchayati raj to women", paper prepared for SSF (Singamma Srinivasan Foundation), 13th February 2005, Bangalore

Parliament unleashes hope

The Indian Parliament's recent actions give hope even to the most cynical of political observers. On December 23, 2005 the Parliament expelled 11 MPs guilty of wrongdoing. In an unusual assertion of its moral resources and political will it both expelled its guilty members and dispelled the widely held view that Indian politics was without hope. The Prime Minister's statement summed it up: "we cannot allow anything to rob the temple of democracy of its pristine dignity".²¹ Developments, such as these, are cause for celebration because they represent the potential for honesty and integrity in the political system.

A promising development at the middle level

There was a unique and constructive discussion on: 'The future of politics – the challenges and potential of the next generation' in May 2005. Among the many issues discussed were:

- How is politics in India evolving? What are the prospects for governance in India?
- Can the younger generation of politicians transform Indian politics for the better?
- What are the views of leading Indian political analysts on these issues?
- What are the perspectives of young legislators on these issues?

During this discussion, several young Karnataka MLAs²² recounted how their path to power challenged the negative stereotype in positive ways. Their recollections included the ways in which they legally obtained nominations and contested their respective elections. Their stories were inspiring and promising for India's polity – even if they are only a minority. Hopefully, their tried and true methods for political success will influence other prospective candidates.

Electoral Rolls

Vote India is a national campaign for political reforms launched by likeminded civil society groups and individuals dedicated to promoting a stronger and more effective democracy. Vote India's primary

²¹ Indian Express, December 24, 2005

²² -Dinesh Gundu Rao – is a second-term MLA from Gandhinagar. He is President of the Karnataka Youth Congress. He is the son of former Karnataka Chief Minister, R Gundu Rao.

-Krishna Byre Gowda was recently re-elected MLA from Vemagal. A Master's in International Relations from American University, he is the son of former Minister C Byre Gowda.

-Mahima Patel is a first-term MLA from Channagiri constituency. He is the son of former Karnataka Chief Minister, J H Patel

-C T Ravi, first-term Chikmagalur MLA, is a President of the Bharatiya Janata Party youth wing.

-Dr. M C Sudhakar is first-term MLA from Chintamani. A dentist by training, he is the son of former minister Chowda Reddy.

-M Mahadev is first-term MLA from Krishna Raja Nagar. He was previously President of the Yuva Janata Dal in Karnataka.

-N L Narendra Babu is first-term MLA from Rajajinagar. He started his public service career as a corporator elected to the Bangalore Mahanagara Palika.

They met in Bangalore under the auspices of Lokniti – and spoke of the theme. The proceedings were assisted by eminent political scientists - Prof. Yogendra Yadav, Sandeep Shastri and Prof. M V Rajeev Gowda of IIM Bangalore. A CD of the discussion is included in the Volume Two: Related Documentations.

initiative is (Related document attached) collective citizens' assertion for changing the nature of our democracy.

The Vote India movement is being launched in all major cities of India – Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Pune, Lucknow, Patna and Hyderabad, and has achieved considerable success. In each city, local civil society partners are supporting the Vote India activities and in cities like Bangalore, Janaagraha are anchoring selected Vote India activities.

The first campaign of Vote India was intended to mobilize citizens at the grassroots level by encouraging citizens' participation in improving the integrity of the voters' lists and was launched in Bangalore by the Chief Election Commissioner, Sri T S Krishnamurthy on April 15, 2005.

Some of the problems associated with voter rolls that were meant to be addressed by this effort include:

- a. Difficulty in getting updates accepted by the local authorities in between summary revisions.
- b. Names missing from the voters list. This includes:
 - Those whose names were there in the previous election or at the time of verification or who have a Voter ID, but still their names do not appear on the list
 - Those that do not make the effort to see that their name is on the list.
- c. Names appearing multiple times in a single list or in multiple lists.
- d. Bogus names on the list.
- e. Mismatch between voter lists and Electronic Photo ID Cards (EPIC)
- f. Management of specific urban issues like:
Frequent shifting of houses, migration, multiple agencies involved in the preparation of the list, complications due to constituencies being spread over wide areas.

Initiatives of the Election Commission

The Election Commission has taken many proactive efforts to improve voter registration in recent years.

- a. Putting Electoral rolls on the website in PDF format
- b. Making the Electoral rolls available on a CD
- c. Online registration of Voters
- d. Online Search for names in the electoral rolls
- e. Downloadable forms for Registration, Deletion, Correction and Objection
- f. Use of local Post Office as a nodal point for display of Voter Rolls and collection of Form 6

These efforts have yielded positive results, but the process needs to be expanded by facilitating greater citizen participation in the management of quality voter lists.

Issues with Voter list verification

Several initiatives in various states have had a significant impact on correcting voter lists in rural areas. In one successful instance, the MKSS practice of having the CEC read out the voter lists formally at all Ward Sabhas (80-100 households) in Rajasthan (order 23/2003-PLN-II) resulted in the correction of over 7 lakh voter entries.

Unfortunately, there is no concept of a Ward Sabha for the urban voter, as is the case for the rural voter; nor is there the equivalent of the Gram Sabha that covers all the voters of the villages in the gram panchayat. Therefore, the CEC's provision for the urban voter, at the time, was for the list to be read out in informal settings like mohalla committees or Resident Welfare Association meetings.

Until formal grassroots platforms are made available in urban local governments, the only alternative for urban communities is to conduct door-to-door verification of the voter list to ensure accuracy. The challenge here is to ensure that the official agencies concerned respond to the effort of citizen groups.

To reiterate our position, we believe that it is necessary to provide for State Funding of elections and simultaneously to eliminate private funding from elections. This decision can in turn catalyze a systemic effort to work out the procedures for such funding, thereby providing required safeguards, ensuring a process of periodic review, and contributing to necessary updates. A Statutory Board for State Funding should be set up in consultation (and conjunction) with the Election Commission. Furthermore, a standing advisory panel with representatives of all recognized political parties, and some from the society at large should organize to assist the Board in various matters, including periodic review.

III

Improving the Enabling Arrangements

Electoral Rolls

The foremost need is to ensure that every single eligible voter in the country is borne on the electoral list and that the lists are kept up-to-date. This includes:

- eliminating ineligible voters from the list. The most effective and least costly way of achieving the above objective is to employ Article 243 of the Constitution, enacted in 1993, which requires each village to have a gram sabha comprised of all eligible voters.
- It could be suggested that the gram Sabhas form a committee responsible for maintaining the voter's list, which should be updated monthly and authenticated by all the members of the committee. The voter's list should be on public display at all times in the office of the gram panchayat; which should also keep a sealed box where any resident of the village could drop in information / additions / deletions etc. These can be taken out, recorded and decided upon by the committee at a town hall meeting on a fixed date / time. All records of births/deaths should also be maintained at the gram sabha level.
- The Voters roll must be commonly used for all elections – Panchayats - Parliament.
- The Election Commission, in conjunction with State Election Commissions created under Article 243 of the Constitution in 1993, should arrange for periodic sample checks, which could take the form of a public reading of the voters roll in a given village.
- In light of the above, all existing procedures / guidelines issued by EC and SECs should be revised.
- With regard to urban voters, their municipal bodies should perform similar functions suitably adapted to the urban situation.
- In short, the laborious burden of voters roll preparation, revision etc. should be shifted on the shoulders of the nationwide universal network of Constitutional bodies under 73rd / 74th Amendment.

Election Commissions

- The EC and SEC are Constitutional authorities that should be assisted in coordinating their operations; and their autonomy should be reinforced vis a vis the Executive.
- An Election Commissioners Board could be set up under the chairmanship of the CEC with all ECs and two SECs (by rotation) to consider and decide upon effective poll norms / arrangements / voters rolls / voting equipment et al. They should have a fund, derived from the consolidated fund of India, at their disposal that would provide the necessary resources for

ensuring fair elections. The Board should publish details of all its decisions within six months and place them on the internet.

- The EC and SEC should publish their annual statutory reports without fail within three months after the close of the year. (There have been delays in EC's annual reports)
- The recommendations for electoral reforms sent to the Prime Minister / Law Minister must be responded to promptly (These have been pending for several years – inconclusively, which is intolerable). The President could make an impact in this area by calling for a quarterly progress report from the Cabinet of the decisions on EC recommendations. If after six months there is no response from Government, the EC should be empowered by Parliament to make and implement a final decision.

State funding of elections

- The cabinet has reportedly accepted the idea of state funding and is considering ways to implement it. These are certainly welcome developments (related document attached).
- Debates regarding alternative funding schemes should encompass the wider public, as well as all political parties. Any and all suggestions should be made available via the internet so that anyone can access them.
- Simultaneously, schemes such as MPLAD, and its associated plans at state levels, must be terminated within the near future because they are not positively contributing to the health of our democracy.

Dissemination of critical knowledge

- Constitutional literacy is essential to the electoral system. The proposed Electoral Board should run a continuous program of constitutional literacy, using electronic and print media to capture all citizens. The UGC network of universities and affiliated colleges should also be lobbied to disseminate this critical knowledge to all college students nearing voter age. Similarly, all NGOs, involved in related areas, should volunteer to conduct educational campaigns. Additionally, the Board's funds could be utilized for production / dissemination of educational materials.
- Legal Literacy: The Law Ministry should post an updated index of all judicial pronouncements relating to the electoral process and election petitions on the internet. It should also include related resolutions of Parliament and State Legislatures.
- Political Literacy: UGC should arrange a nationwide updated list of political studies on its internet.
- The EC should publish disclosures by candidates, as well as any erroneous findings/ reporting on the internet.
- The EC should put on the internet all reports / returns filed by recognized political parties.

Political Parties

- To enhance public knowledge and confidence in political parties, the following vital information has to be provided:
 1. their membership
 2. election of their office-bearers / designated decision making bodies like Parliamentary boards
 3. Process of selection of party candidates
 4. Manifestos
 5. Annual reports

Civil Society

- To improve upon the nature and quality of work conducted by civil society organizations, the following recommendations should be adopted:
 1. Mass education on political system and duties of citizens
 2. Oversee updated/universal voter registration
 3. Monitoring of political parties vis a vis their constitution/manifestos, and report to the nation
 4. Set up election watch committees
 5. Report on trends in election results especially, the place of women, dalits, STs, backward areas and background of elected MPs/MLAs.

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 26. Though there are examples of revolutionary social change at state level also they have not been so institutionalized as at the Panchayat level. Zoya Hasan, for instance points out “the erstwhile largest Indian state, Uttar Pradesh (UP), has been ruled more than once in the 1990s by parties and coalitions representing the backward castes and dalits clearly shows the silent revolution taking place through the ballot in India. Not only do these social groups have leaders and parties representing their cause, increasingly, national parties also resort to ethnic strategies of political mobilization to see their support and draw them out. **[Zoya Hasan, ‘Representation and Redistribution: The New Lower Caste Politics in North India’, in Frankel et al. (eds), *Transforming India*, pp. 146-75].**
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 -Krishna Byre Gowda was recently re-elected MLA from Vemagal. A Master's in International Relations from American University, he is the son of former Minister C Byre Gowda.
 -Mahima Patel is a first-term MLA from Channagiri constituency. He is the son of former Karnataka Chief Minister, J H Patel
 -C T Ravi, first-term Chikmagalur MLA, is a President of the Bharatiya Janata Party youth wing.
 -Dr. M C Sudhakar is first-term MLA from Chintamani. A dentist by training, he is the son of former minister Chowda Reddy.
 -M Mahadev is first-term MLA from Krishna Raja Nagar. He was previously President of the Yuva Janata Dal in Karnataka.
 -N L Narendra Babu is first-term MLA from Rajajinagar. He started his public service career as a corporator elected to the Bangalore Mahanagara Palika.
- They met in Bangalore under the auspices of Lokniti – and spoke of the theme. The proceedings were assisted by eminent political scientists - Prof. Yogendra Yadav, Sandeep

Shastri and Prof. M V Rajeev Gowda of IIM Bangalore. A CD of the discussion is included in the Volume Two: Related Documentations. [Transcribed from CD draft attached]

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Indian Elections -Scale of Operation

Elections in India are events involving political mobilisation and organisational complexity on an amazing scale. In the 1999 election to Lok Sabha there were 1299 candidates from 7 National parties, 750 candidates from 40 State parties, 654 candidates from officially recognised parties and 1945 Independent candidates. A total number of 37,16,69,282 people voted out of total electorate size of 61,95,59,944. The Election Commission employed almost 40,00,000 people to run the election. A vast number of civilian police and security forces were deployed to ensure that the elections were carried out peacefully.

* Source: Election Commission of India

Constituencies & Reservation of Seats

The country has been divided into 543 Parliamentary Constituencies, each of which returns one MP to the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Parliament. The size and shape of the parliamentary constituencies are determined by an independent Delimitation Commission, which aims to create constituencies which have roughly the same population, subject to geographical considerations and the boundaries of the states and administrative areas.

How Constituency Boundaries are drawn up

Delimitation is the redrawing of the boundaries of parliamentary or assembly constituencies to make sure that there are, as near as practicable, the same number of people in each constituency. In India boundaries are meant to be examined after the ten-yearly census to reflect changes in population, for which Parliament by law establishes an independent Delimitation Commission, made up of the Chief Election Commissioner and two judges or ex-judges from the Supreme Court or High Court. However, under a constitutional amendment of 1976, delimitation was suspended until after the census of 2001, ostensibly so that states' family-planning programmes would not affect their political representation in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas. This has led to wide discrepancies in the size of constituencies, with the largest having over 25,00,000 electors, and the smallest less than 50,000. Delimitation exercise, with 2001 census data released on 31st December 2003, is now under process.

* Source: Election Commission of India

Political Parties and Elections

Political parties are an established part of modern mass democracy, and the conduct of elections in India is largely dependent on the behaviour of political parties. Although many candidates for Indian elections are independent, the winning candidates for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections usually stand as members of political parties, and opinion polls suggest that people tend to vote for a party rather than a particular candidate. Parties offer candidates organisational support, and by offering a broader election campaign, looking at the

record of government and putting forward alternative proposals for government, help voters make a choice about how the government is run.

Registration with Election Commission

Political parties have to be registered with the Election Commission. The Commission determines whether the party is structured and committed to principles of democracy, secularism and socialism in accordance with the Indian Constitution and would uphold the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India. Parties are expected to hold organisational elections and have a written constitution. The Anti-defection law, passed in 1985, prevents MPs or MLAs elected as candidates from one party forming or joining a new party, unless they comprise more than one-third of the original party in the legislature.

* Source: Election Commission of India

Recognition and Reservation of Symbols

According to certain criteria, set by the Election Commission regarding the length of political activity and success in elections, parties are categorised by the Commission as National or State parties, or simply declared registered-unrecognised parties. How a party is classified determines a party's right to certain privileges, such as access to electoral rolls and provision of time for political broadcasts on the state-owned television and radio stations - All India Radio and Doordarshan - and also the important question of the allocation of the party symbol. Party symbols enable illiterate voters to identify the candidate of the party they wish to vote for. National parties are given a symbol that is for their use only, throughout the country. State parties have the sole use of a symbol in the state in which they are recognised as such Registered-unrecognised parties can choose a symbol from a selection of 'free' symbols.

* Source: Election Commission of India

Splits and mergers and anti-defection law

Splits, mergers and alliances have frequently disrupted the compositions of political parties. This has led to a number of disputes over which section of a divided party gets to keep the party symbol, and how to classify the resulting parties in terms of national and state parties. The Election Commission has to resolve these disputes, although its decisions can be challenged in the courts.

* Source: Election Commission of India

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