Chapter 8: Recent Developments in Indian Politics

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Unscramble a bunch of disarranged press clipping file of Unni-Munni and arrange the file chronologically: (a) Implementation of the recommendation of the Mandal Commission; (b) Formation of the Janata Dal; (c) Supreme Court judgment on the Ram Janmabhoomi; (d) Assassination of Indira Gandhi; (e) The formation of NDA government; (f) Formation of the UPA government.

Chronological order: (d) Assassination of Indira Gandhi (1984) -> (b) Formation of the Janata Dal (1980s, before the 1989 elections) -> (a) Implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendation (August 1990) -> (e) Formation of the NDA government (1998, re-elected 1999) -> (f) Formation of the UPA government (2004) -> (c) Supreme Court judgment on Ram Janmabhoomi (9 November 2019).

Q2 Match the following: (a) Politics of Consensus; (b) Caste based parties; (c) Personal Law and Gender Justice; (d) Growing strength of Regional parties -- with: i. Shah Bano case; ii. Rise of OBCs; iii. Coalition government; iv. Agreement on Economic policies.

(a) Politics of Consensus - iv. Agreement on economic policies; (b) Caste based parties - ii. Rise of OBCs; (c) Personal Law and Gender Justice - i. Shah Bano case; (d) Growing strength of Regional parties - iii. Coalition government.

Q3 State the main issues in Indian politics in the period after 1989. What different configurations of political parties these differences lead to?

The main issues after 1989 were: (1) the decline of Congress dominance, ending the 'Congress system' after its 1989 defeat; (2) the 'Mandal issue' - OBC reservation in central government jobs, and the rise of OBC and Dalit based parties such as the BSP; (3) the new economic policies (structural adjustment) from 1991; (4) the Ram Janmabhoomi/Ayodhya dispute and the debate on communalism, secularism and democracy, along with the rise of the BJP and Hindutva politics; and (5) the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 and the change in Congress leadership.

These produced new party configurations. No single party won a majority in Lok Sabha elections from 1989 to 2014, so an era of multi-party coalitions began. The National Front (1989) was supported from outside by both the BJP and the Left; the United Front (1996) had Congress support; the BJP-led NDA ruled from 1998-99 and 1999-2004; and the Congress-led UPA formed governments in 2004 and 2009. Regional parties became key partners in all these alliances. In 2014 and 2019 the BJP won a majority on its own, though it still kept NDA partners.

Q4 'In the new era of coalition politics, political parties are not aligning or realigning on the basis of ideology.' What arguments would you put forward to support or oppose this statement?

In support: alliances have been driven by power-sharing rather than shared ideology. In 1989 the BJP and the Left, ideological opposites, both backed the National Front only to keep Congress out. In 1996 the Left and Congress together supported the United Front to keep the BJP out. Most NDA partners did not accept the BJP's 'Hindutva' ideology, yet joined it and the government completed a full term. Coalition politics has shifted the focus from ideological differences to power-sharing arrangements, and parties readily changed partners.

Against: ideology has not vanished. Opposition to the BJP's policies kept many parties from supporting its 1996 government, so alliances were often formed around opposing a common ideology. Parties such as the Left withdrew support from the UPA in 2008 over the Indo-US nuclear deal, a matter of principle. Parties of the OBC and Dalit movements are built on social-justice ideas. A broad consensus on economic policy, OBC reservation and the role of state parties exists, but parties still differ on secularism and identity. So alignments are pragmatic, yet not wholly ideology-free.

Q5 Trace the emergence of BJP as a significant force in post-Emergency politics.

After the Emergency, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh merged into the Janata Party. When the Janata Party fell and broke up, supporters of the erstwhile Jana Sangh formed the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980. At first it adopted a broad platform, embracing 'Gandhian Socialism' along with cultural nationalism, but it did poorly in the 1984 elections. After 1986 it made nationalism the core of its ideology and pursued 'Hindutva' for political mobilisation. Two developments around 1986 became central: the Shah Bano case and the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, which the BJP called appeasement of the minority; and the Ayodhya issue, after the district court ordered the disputed structure unlocked in 1986. The BJP consolidated in the 1991 and 1996 elections, became the largest party in 1996, led coalition governments from 1998 to 1999 and, re-elected in 1999, under Atal Behari Vajpayee completed a full term. In 2014 it won 282 seats and in 2019 303 seats on its own.

Q6 In spite of the decline of Congress dominance, the Congress party continues to influence politics in the country. Do you agree? Give reasons.

Yes, I agree. The chapter notes that the Congress lost the centrality it once had after 1989, but remained an important party. No other single party took its place after its decline. The Congress recovered after the 1991 elections, when it emerged as the single largest party and formed the government under Narsimha Rao, and it has ruled the country more than any other party even since 1989. It supported the United Front government in 1996. In 2004 it entered coalitions in a big way and led the UPA, partly reviving by raising its seats; in 2009 it rose from 145 to 206 seats and Manmohan Singh became Prime Minister again. Along with the BJP, it has often polled more than fifty per cent of votes between them, and politics has been structured around the coalition led by it and the one led by the BJP. Many regional parties also trace their origin to Congress. So it still shapes alliances and policy debates.

Q7 Many people think that a two-party system is required for successful democracy. Drawing from India's experience of last 30 years, write an essay on what advantages the present party system in India has.

India's experience since 1989 shows that a multi-party system can work well for a vast and diverse society, even without a two-party format.

First, it gives representation to diversity. Social groups such as Dalits and OBCs, and regions, found a political voice through parties like the BSP and state-level parties. This made democracy more inclusive and politics more responsive to different interests.

Second, it forced cooperation. Since no party won a majority in Lok Sabha elections from 1989 to 2014, governments were formed through coalitions in which regional parties shared power at the Centre. The distinction between state-level and national parties became less important, deepening federalism.

Third, it encouraged consensus and pragmatism. Despite fierce competition, a broad agreement emerged on new economic policies, backward-caste claims such as OBC reservation, the role of state parties, and pragmatic alliances. Parties of differing views, such as the NDA partners, ran a government for a full term.

Fourth, it has kept politics competitive and flexible. Power could change hands, and Congress dominance gave way to real competition. A two-party system could leave out minorities and regional concerns. Hence India's present party system, with all its instability, has been a strength of its democracy.

Q8 Read the passage and answer the questions below (Zoya Hasan: party politics in India has confronted numerous challenges; the Congress system has destroyed itself; the fragmentation of the Congress coalition has triggered a new emphasis on self-representation, raising questions about the party system's capacity to accommodate diverse interests; an important test is to evolve a party system or parties that can effectively articulate and aggregate a variety of interests.) (a) Write a short note on what the author calls challenges of the party system in the light of what you have read in this chapter. (b) Give an example from this chapter of the lack of accommodation and aggregation mentioned in this passage. (c) Why is it necessary for parties to accommodate and aggregate variety of interests?

(a) The Congress used to be a 'coalition' of different interests and social groups, which gave rise to the 'Congress system'. As sections left the fold and formed their own parties, and regional, Dalit and OBC parties arose, the system fragmented. The challenge is that many parties now represent narrow groups or regions, and no single party or system combines all interests. Unstable alliances, as in 1989 and 1996, also made governments fragile. The party system must evolve to articulate and aggregate this variety of interests.

(b) The Congress lost support among backward castes, who then moved to other parties, and Dalit and OBC politics has often developed independently and in competition with each other. Likewise, the Shah Bano episode, where the government's response to Muslim leaders was opposed by women's groups, shows how interests were not reconciled.

(c) India is a plural society of many castes, religions, regions and classes. If parties do not accommodate and aggregate these interests, groups feel excluded, conflicts rise and stable government becomes difficult. Accommodation makes democracy inclusive and legitimate, and helps resolve conflicts through due process, as seen in the Ayodhya verdict.