

The Changing Nature of Political Parties in Contemporary Indian Politics

Dr. Kyasaram Kishtaiah

MA, PhD, Assistant Professor of Political Science
Government Arts & Science College (A)
Kamareddy- PIN: 503111, Telangana.

Abstract:

Political parties in India have undergone a profound transformation since the decline of the Congress system in the late 1980s. This paper examines the changing nature of political parties in contemporary Indian politics by analysing shifts in party-system structure, ideology, organisation, financing, communication, and representation between 1984 and 2025. Using a descriptive-analytical and comparative design, it draws on Election Commission of India results, Association for Democratic Reforms reports, Lokniti-CSDS survey findings, and the scholarly literature. The findings indicate that India has moved from Congress dominance through fragmented coalition politics to an asymmetric multi-party system anchored by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), even as the 2024 Lok Sabha verdict restored coalition dependence at the national level. Parties have become more leader-centric, professionalised, and welfare-oriented, while competition increasingly revolves around identity and delivery rather than class or programme. Concentrated finance, criminalisation, dynastic succession, and weak internal democracy persist, and women remain under-represented. Regional parties continue to shape federal bargaining but face organisational and electoral pressure in several states. The paper argues that Indian parties are best understood as hybrid organisations combining catch-all, cartel, and personalised-leadership traits, and concludes with reform proposals on transparency, internal democracy, and inclusive candidate selection for representative democracy.

Keywords: Political parties; party system; Indian politics; Bharatiya Janata Party; regional parties; coalition politics; political finance; Lok Sabha elections.

1. Introduction

Political parties are the central institutions of representative democracy: they aggregate interests, recruit leaders, structure electoral choice, and convert votes into governing authority. In India, where more than 640 million citizens voted in the 2024 Lok Sabha election (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2024), parties perform these functions at a scale and across a diversity of social settings unmatched elsewhere. Yet the party landscape of 2025 bears little resemblance to that of the first four decades after independence. The dominant, catch-all Indian National Congress (INC) that Kothari (1964) analysed as the centre of a "Congress system" no longer organises national politics; a once-marginal Hindu nationalist party has become the pivot of competition; and hundreds of regional, caste-based, and issue-based parties negotiate space within a federal structure.

This transformation is not only a matter of which party wins. The internal character of parties has also changed. Leadership has become more personalised, campaign machinery more professionalised and data-driven, welfare delivery a core electoral appeal, and party finance more concentrated and opaquer. At the same time, older concerns, including dynastic succession, criminalisation, weak internal democracy, and the under-representation of women, persist despite decades of reform debate. The 2024 general election, in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell short of a single-party majority for the first time since 2014 yet returned to office at the head of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), shows that dominance and dependence now coexist.

Against this background, the paper asks how the nature of political parties in India has changed since the 1980s and what these changes imply for representation and accountability. It has three objectives: (a) to trace the evolution of the party system from Congress dominance to the present BJP-centred configuration; (b) to analyse change in party ideology, organisation, finance, communication, and representation; and (c) to assess the consequences for federalism, coalition-building, and democratic quality.

The central argument is that Indian parties have evolved into hybrid organisations. They retain the vote-maximising logic of broad social coalitions (Kirchheimer, 1966), display cartel-like dependence on state and corporate resources (Katz & Mair, 1995), and increasingly cohere around personalised, charismatic leadership. This hybridity helps explain why parties can be electorally vibrant yet institutionally thin. The paper reviews the literature, outlines its methodology, and then examines party-system change, ideology, regional parties, organisation, money and criminality, digital communication, and inclusion, before turning to a discussion and conclusion.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Classical and Coalition-Era Perspectives

Early scholarship treated the Indian party system as distinctive. Kothari (1964) argued that Congress functioned as a dominant party within a system in which opposition parties operated at the margins as parties of pressure, so that factional bargaining inside Congress substituted for competition between parties. Kohli (1990) later linked Congress's decline to the erosion of its organisation and the personalisation of authority under Indira Gandhi, a diagnosis that anticipates current concerns about leader-centric parties. Yadav (1999) identified a "third electoral system" from 1989, marked by the end of Congress dominance, the rise of regional and backward-caste parties, and the growing importance of state-level contests. Later work showed how coalition governments compelled national parties to bargain with regional allies (Ruparelia, 2015; Sridharan, 2014) and how competition became federalised (Sáez, 2002; Wyatt, 2009; Ziegfeld, 2016). Chhibber (1999) and Chhibber and Verma (2018) stressed that ideology and identity, rather than class, structured party alignments.

2.2 Post-2014 Scholarship

The recent literature centres on the BJP's ascent. Palshikar (2018) describes an emerging hegemony in which electoral dominance is accompanied by ideological and organisational expansion. Jaffrelot (2021) characterises the political order as an "ethnic democracy" in which majoritarian identity takes precedence, while Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) ask whether India is witnessing a new party system or a new political system altogether. Vaishnav and Hinton (2019) describe a "fourth party system" combining BJP dominance with a fragmented opposition. Complementary studies emphasise welfare, showing that direct-benefit programmes helped the BJP consolidate support among poorer voters (Deshpande et al., 2019;

Sircar, 2020). A parallel body of work addresses organisation and money: Vaishnav (2017) shows that parties nominate candidates with criminal records because such candidates bring financial resources and local dominance; Kapur and Vaishnav (2018) examine how opaque political finance shapes competition; and Chandra (2016) documents dynastic recruitment across parties.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

Comparative party theory supplies two useful lenses. Kirchheimer's (1966) catch-all party downplays ideology to maximise votes across social groups, while Katz and Mair's (1995) cartel party relies on state resources and inter-party accommodation, weakening its links with civil society. Neither fits India perfectly, since Indian parties combine broad appeals with strong identity cues and depend largely on private rather than public funding. Moreover, much of the existing literature examines either the electoral fortunes of parties or their internal features, and few studies integrate the two while accounting for the 2024 verdict and the post-electoral-bond context. This paper therefore analyses parties along five dimensions: (a) system-level competition, (b) ideological positioning, (c) organisation and leadership, (d) resources and finance, and (e) representation. Change is assessed against the baseline of the 1980s, when Congress remained dominant and coalition governance had not yet become normal.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical and comparative design based on secondary data. Electoral data on seats and vote shares for 1984 to 2024 were drawn from results and statistical reports published by the ECI. Data on the criminal, financial, and gender profile of winning candidates, and on party income, were drawn from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), which analyses affidavits filed by candidates with the ECI. Data on electoral bonds come from disclosures made after the Supreme Court's February 2024 judgment. Survey evidence draws on the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) National Election Studies. Peer-reviewed articles, monographs, and think-tank reports were identified through Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the archive of *Economic and Political Weekly*.

The unit of analysis is the political party, examined at national and state levels. Descriptive statistics are presented in tables and interpreted in light of the framework outlined in Section 2. The study has limitations. It relies on secondary data; ADR figures are based on self-declared affidavits; disclosure of party finance remains incomplete; and figures for recent elections are subject to revision. The analysis is therefore interpretive rather than causal, and it reflects information available up to early 2025.

4. From Congress Dominance to a BJP-Centred Party System

Table 1 summarises the performance of the two largest parties in Lok Sabha elections from 1984 to 2024. The 1984 election, held after Indira Gandhi's assassination, gave the Congress 414 seats, the largest majority in parliamentary history, while the BJP won two. Within five years the picture had changed: the 1989 election produced the first of a series of hung parliaments, and between 1989 and 2014 no single party secured a Lok Sabha majority.

Table 1

Performance of the INC and the BJP in Lok Sabha Elections, 1984–2024

Year	INC seats	INC vote (%)	BJP seats	BJP vote (%)	Government formed
1984	414	49.1	2	7.4	INC
1989	197	39.5	85	11.4	National Front (BJP and Left outside support)
1991	244	36.3	120	20.1	INC (minority)
1996	140	28.8	161	20.3	BJP (brief); United Front
1998	141	25.8	182	25.6	NDA
1999	114	28.3	182	23.8	NDA
2004	145	26.5	138	22.2	UPA
2009	206	28.6	116	18.8	UPA
2014	44	19.5	282	31.3	NDA
2019	52	19.5	303	37.4	NDA
2024	99	21.2	240	36.6	NDA

Note. INC = Indian National Congress; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; NDA = National Democratic Alliance; UPA = United Progressive Alliance. Vote shares are rounded to one decimal place. Source: Election Commission of India (various years).

Three phases can be distinguished. The first, from 1984 to 1991, saw the unravelling of Congress dominance amid corruption controversies, the mobilisation of backward-caste and regional politics following the Mandal Commission's recommendations, and the BJP's rise through the Ayodhya movement. The second, from 1996 to 2014, was one of fragmented coalition politics. Neither national party exceeded 29 percent of the vote in any election between 1996 and 2009, and governments were formed through pre- and post-poll coalitions, from the United Front to the Vajpayee-led NDA (1998–2004) and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) under Manmohan Singh (2004–2014). In this phase regional parties became indispensable partners (Ruparelia, 2015).

The third phase began in 2014, when the BJP won 282 seats, the first single-party majority in three decades, and repeated the feat with 303 seats in 2019. Between 1999 and 2019 the BJP's vote share rose by nearly 14 percentage points, from 23.8 to 37.4 percent, while the Congress fell from 28.3 to 19.5 percent. This was not mere victory but, as Palshikar (2018) argues, hegemonic consolidation: the BJP expanded into new regions, including the north-east and Odisha, and drew in social groups, particularly non-dominant backward castes and Dalit subgroups, that had earlier gravitated to regional parties (Vaishnav & Hinton, 2019).

The 2024 election qualified but did not reverse this pattern. The BJP won 240 seats with 36.6 percent of the vote, 32 short of the majority mark of 272, and formed the government with allies, notably the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)]. The Congress improved to 99 seats and 21.2 percent, and the opposition INDIA alliance won 234 seats (ECI, 2024). Yet the BJP's vote share fell by less than one percentage point from 2019, and its seat losses were concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and West Bengal. The verdict thus reveals a system that is more competitive at the margin but still asymmetric, with the BJP more than twice the size of any rival.

The national picture masks considerable state-level diversity. In several states, including Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, competition remains largely bipolar between the BJP and the Congress; in others, such as Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha, regional or state-specific parties have historically anchored the system; and in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar competition involves multiple caste-based parties whose alliances shift between elections. The Left, once a significant force in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura, has been reduced largely to Kerala. The party system is therefore better described as a set of state-level systems linked by a national contest than as a single uniform structure (Yadav, 1999).

Party proliferation is a second marker of change. The number of parties contesting Lok Sabha elections rose from 53 in 1952 to 464 in 2014 and 673 in 2019 (ECI, 2019). Most are registered but unrecognised parties with negligible vote shares, yet their growth reflects low entry barriers, the value of party labels as instruments of local bargaining, and, in some cases, strategic candidate proliferation. Meanwhile the hierarchy of recognised parties has shifted: in April 2023 the ECI accorded national-party status to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which emerged from the 2011–12 anti-corruption movement, and withdrew it from the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

5. Ideological Realignment: Identity, Welfare, and Nationalism

Ideological competition in India has not disappeared; it has been reconfigured. The axis of Left versus Right on economic policy, never sharply defined in India, has been overtaken by contests over identity, nationhood, and the state's role in delivering benefits. Three developments stand out.

First, Hindu nationalism moved from the periphery to the centre of party competition. The BJP's programme of cultural nationalism, reflected in the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, and the consecration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya in January 2024, has redefined the terms on which other parties campaign (Jaffrelot, 2021). Opposition parties have oscillated between defending minority rights and adopting softer versions of majoritarian symbolism, evidence that the ideological centre of gravity has shifted.

Second, welfare has become a central party good. Since 2014, schemes such as Ujjwala (cooking-gas connections), Jan Dhan bank accounts, PM-Kisan income transfers, and free foodgrain distribution reaching some 800 million people have been presented as personal benefits flowing from the leader to the beneficiary (Deshpande et al., 2019; Sircar, 2020). This beneficiary-oriented politics has a counterpart at the state level, where parties of different ideological colours compete through cash transfers and services targeted at women, including Ladli Behna in Madhya Pradesh, Gruha Lakshmi in Karnataka, and Ladki Bahin in Maharashtra. That competition across the ideological divide suggests that party programmes are converging on targeted transfers rather than structural reform. It also coincides with a change in the electorate: in 2019, women's turnout (67.2 percent) exceeded men's (67.0 percent) for the first time (ECI, 2019).

Third, the opposition has attempted to build counter-narratives around social justice, a national caste census, constitutional protection, and economic distress. In 2024 the Congress and its allies campaigned on the defence of the Constitution, reservations, and unemployment, themes that appear to have resonated in Uttar Pradesh, where the Samajwadi Party (SP) won 37 seats to the BJP's 33 (ECI, 2024). In the same state the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), long the principal Dalit-based party, won no seat with about 2 percent of the national vote, underscoring the fluidity of caste-based loyalties.

On economic policy, differences among major parties are now largely differences of degree. Since the liberalisation of the early 1990s, parties across the spectrum have accepted market-oriented growth as a governing framework while competing over the design of subsidies, welfare, and regulation. The Left, once the principal advocate of an alternative economic programme, now governs only Kerala and holds a handful of Lok Sabha seats, and its distinctive ideological voice has weakened accordingly. As a result, voters are offered contrasting narratives about identity and delivery more than contrasting economic models.

Overall, ideological change in Indian parties is best read as a shift from programmatic differentiation to identity- and delivery-based appeals. Parties compete less over what the state should do than over whom it is for and who delivers.

6. Regional Parties, Federal Bargaining, and Coalition Politics

Regional parties constitute the second pillar of the Indian party system. Their emergence reflected linguistic, cultural, and caste-based mobilisations against centralised Congress rule (Wyatt, 2009; Ziegfeld, 2016), and their consolidation after 1989 made them indispensable to national governance. For most of the period between 1989 and 2014, national governments depended on regional allies for a majority (Ruparelia, 2015).

The post-2014 period complicated this picture. The BJP's single-party majorities in 2014 and 2019 weakened the bargaining leverage of allies, and several parties, including the Shiv Sena, the Shiromani Akali Dal, and the JD(U) at different times, left or re-entered the NDA. Regional parties have also faced pressure from within. The Shiv Sena split in 2022 and the NCP in 2023, and in each case the ECI recognised the breakaway faction as the party (in February 2023 and February 2024 respectively), showing how organisational disputes can decide control over a party's name and symbol. The BJP has meanwhile displaced or absorbed regional competitors in several states; in Odisha, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) lost office in 2024 after governing since 2000.

Regional parties nevertheless remain formidable where they combine subnational identity with welfare delivery. In 2024 the alliance led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) won all 39 seats in Tamil Nadu, the AITC won 29 of West Bengal's 42 seats, and the TDP-led alliance swept Andhra Pradesh, winning 164 of 175 assembly seats and 21 of 25 Lok Sabha seats, with the TDP alone winning 135 and 16, respectively (ECI, 2024). Table 2 shows the composition of the 2024 Lok Sabha by major party.

Table 2

Seats Won by Major Parties in the 2024 Lok Sabha Election

Party	Alliance	Main base	Seats
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	NDA	National	240
Indian National Congress (INC)	INDIA	National	99
Samajwadi Party (SP)	INDIA	Uttar Pradesh	37
All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	INDIA	West Bengal	29
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	INDIA	Tamil Nadu	22
Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	NDA	Andhra Pradesh	16
Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)]	NDA	Bihar	12
Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray)	INDIA	Maharashtra	9
Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar)	INDIA	Maharashtra	8
Shiv Sena (Shinde)	NDA	Maharashtra	7
Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas)	NDA	Bihar	5
YSR Congress Party (YSRCP)	Unaligned	Andhra Pradesh	4

Note. NDA won 293 seats and the INDIA alliance 234 in total; the remainder went to unaligned parties and independents. Source: Election Commission of India (2024).

The TDP (16 seats) and the JD(U) (12 seats) together contributed 28 members to a BJP that held 240, making coalition management a central skill once more. But the new coalition differs from those of the 1990s: the senior partner is many times larger than any ally, and the BJP retained the home, defence, finance, and external affairs portfolios. Coalition dependence is therefore real but asymmetric.

Alliance formation itself has become a strategic instrument. In July 2023 opposition parties formed the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) to consolidate anti-BJP votes, and the NDA responded by assembling dozens of smaller partners. The opposition alliance's cohesion proved uneven: several members contested against each other in some states, and a few, including the JD(U) in January 2024, left to rejoin the NDA before the election. The experience shows that alliances are negotiated state by state, on the basis of local vote arithmetic rather than a national programme, which limits their capacity to present a single coherent alternative.

State elections show volatility rather than uniform dominance. Table 3 summarises eleven assembly elections held between 2023 and early 2025. Incumbent governments were defeated in seven of the eleven contests, and the winners include the BJP, the Congress, and regional parties in alliance with one or the other. The pattern suggests that voters differentiate between national and state elections, rewarding the BJP heavily in national contests while holding state governments accountable for local performance, a divergence long noted in the literature on federalised party competition (Sáez, 2002; Yadav, 1999).

Table 3

State Assembly Elections, 2023–2025: Winners and Incumbent Outcomes

State	Year	Winning party or alliance	Seats won (of total)	Incumbent
Karnataka	2023	INC	135 (of 224)	Defeated
Madhya Pradesh	2023	BJP	163 (of 230)	Retained
Rajasthan	2023	BJP	115 (of 199)	Defeated
Chhattisgarh	2023	BJP	54 (of 90)	Defeated
Telangana	2023	INC	64 (of 119)	Defeated
Haryana	2024	BJP	48 (of 90)	Retained
Maharashtra	2024	BJP-led Mahayuti	230 (of 288)	Retained
Jharkhand	2024	JMM-led alliance	56 (of 81)	Retained
Andhra Pradesh	2024	TDP-led alliance	164 (of 175)	Defeated
Odisha	2024	BJP	78 (of 147)	Defeated
Delhi	2025	BJP	48 (of 70)	Defeated

Note. JMM = Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. Seat totals refer to the winning party or alliance as a whole.

Source: Election Commission of India (2023–2025).

7. Leadership, Organisation, and Dynasty

A defining feature of contemporary parties is the concentration of authority in a single leader. The BJP's 2024 campaign was framed around "Modi ki guarantee," and its messaging was centred on the Prime Minister's image. Regional parties display a similar pattern: the AITC is closely identified with Mamata Banerjee, the BJD with Naveen Patnaik, the AAP with Arvind Kejriwal, and the YSR Congress Party with Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy. Personalisation carries electoral benefits, offering voters a simple cue for choice, but it makes party fortunes contingent on the popularity of one individual and complicates succession.

Personalisation is not incompatible with organisational strength. The BJP combines a dominant leader with an extensive cadre network linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and booth-level committees, which gives it a mobilisational capacity that most rivals lack (Palshikar, 2018). The Congress, by contrast, has struggled with a weakened organisation and ambiguous leadership arrangements, although its October 2022 presidential election, the first contested poll in over two decades and won by Mallikarjun Kharge with 7,897 votes to Shashi Tharoor's 1,072, was a rare attempt at internal contestation.

Formal internal democracy remains weak. Parties must register with the ECI and file constitutions that commit them to democratic principles, but the Commission has limited powers to enforce internal elections, and organisational polls are frequently postponed or uncontested. The Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, introduced in 1985 to curb defections, gives party leaderships strong control over legislators, yet defections and splits have still reconfigured governments in Karnataka (2019), Madhya Pradesh (2020), and Maharashtra (2022). The Law Commission of India (1999) recommended statutory regulation of internal party democracy and financial transparency, but its proposals on internal democracy have not been legislated.

Candidate selection illustrates the same concentration of power. In most parties, tickets are decided by a small central group, often with limited consultation of local units, and the "winnability" of candidates, judged by financial resources, local networks, and caste arithmetic, weighs more heavily than long service

(Vaishnav, 2017). Defection just before elections is common, as politicians move between parties when ticket allocations are announced and treat parties as vehicles rather than permanent affiliations. This pattern reduces the incentive to invest in grassroots organisation and reinforces the leader's control, since nominations become instruments of loyalty.

Dynastic succession is a further feature. Chandra (2016) shows that hereditary recruitment occurs across parties and regions rather than being confined to one party, and French (2011) estimated that nearly 30 percent of members of the fifteenth Lok Sabha (2009–2014) had family connections in politics. Dynasty is most institutionalised in family-controlled regional parties such as the DMK, the SP, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and the TDP, where leadership passes within the family. It persists because family names lower the costs of candidate selection, ensure loyalty, and maintain control over party assets. The counterpart is a narrower pool of leadership recruitment, which weakens the party's role as a channel of political mobility.

8. Money, Criminalisation, and the Politics of Resources

Party finance is where the cartel-like tendencies of Indian parties are most visible. Campaigns are expensive, formal limits on candidate spending are widely circumvented, and parties themselves face no expenditure ceiling, so they depend on large donations whose sources are often opaque (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2018). The ADR (2024b) reported that the BJP's income in the financial year 2022–23 was approximately ₹2,361 crore, roughly five times the Congress's ₹452 crore.

The electoral bond scheme, introduced in 2018, allowed anonymous donations to parties through bank instruments. In February 2024 a five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court unanimously struck the scheme down as a violation of citizens' right to information under Article 19(1)(a) and directed disclosure of donor data (*Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India*, 2024). The data subsequently published showed that encashed bonds were heavily concentrated in the ruling party (Table 4).

Table 4

Approximate Value of Electoral Bonds Encashed by Major Parties, 2019–2024

Party	Amount (₹ crore)	Share of total (%)
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	6,061	47.5
All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	1,610	12.6
Indian National Congress (INC)	1,422	11.1
Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS)	1,215	9.5
Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	776	6.1
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	639	5.0

Note. Amounts are approximate and rounded from disclosures published by the ECI in March 2024. Shares are computed on the total encashed by all parties (approximately ₹12,769 crore). Source: Election Commission of India (2024) disclosures following *Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India* (2024).

The judgment removed a legal shield but did not resolve the underlying problem. Party funding continues through electoral trusts, cash donations below disclosure thresholds, and in-kind support, and no statute caps party expenditure. The concentration of resources in the ruling party raises the question of whether financial advantage reinforces electoral advantage, a concern that the bond data make salient without establishing causation.

Enforcement capacity compounds these gaps. The ECI can register parties, allocate symbols, and monitor candidate spending, but it has limited statutory power to deregister parties for violations or to compel internal party reforms, and its action on model-code violations typically stops at notices and short campaign bans. The 2023 law changing the selection process for Election Commissioners has also prompted debate about the institution's independence. Regulation of parties thus rests on a legal framework designed for a less competitive and less expensive era.

Criminalisation is the second component. Vaishnav (2017) argues that parties nominate candidates facing criminal charges not despite but because of their records: such candidates can self-finance, command local networks, and win. Table 5 shows that the share of winners declaring criminal cases rose at every recent election, from 30 percent in 2009 to 46 percent in 2024, while the share declaring serious cases more than doubled. Wealth follows a similar trend, with 93 percent of 2024 winners declaring assets above ₹1 crore (ADR, 2024a). Supreme Court directions since 2018 require parties to publicise candidates' criminal antecedents and to justify their selection (*Public Interest Foundation v. Union of India*, 2018), yet the data suggest that disclosure has not deterred nomination.

Table 5
Profile of Lok Sabha Winners, 2009–2024

Indicator	2009	2014	2019	2024
Winners declaring criminal cases (%)	30	34	43	46
Winners declaring serious criminal cases (%)	14	21	29	31
Winners declaring assets above ₹1 crore (%)	58	82	88	93
Women members (number)	59	62	78	74
Women members (%)	10.9	11.4	14.4	13.6

Note. Percentages of winners are as reported by ADR from candidate affidavits and are rounded; women's representation is calculated on 543 seats. Sources: Association for Democratic Reforms (2024a); Election Commission of India (various years).

9. Digital Communication and the Professionalisation of Campaigns

Campaign practice has been transformed by digital technology. Parties now maintain social media "war rooms," large networks of WhatsApp groups reaching down to the polling-booth level, in-house or outsourced data-analytics teams, and paid influencer networks. The BJP was the early leader in this field (Chaturvedi, 2016), and other parties, including the Congress, the AAP, and regional parties such as the DMK and the AITC, have built comparable capacity. Comparative research on organised social media manipulation identifies India among the countries in which parties deploy coordinated online campaigns (Campbell-Smith & Bradshaw, 2019).

These developments have three implications. First, they reduce the cost of reaching voters directly, which favours parties with strong leaders and centralised message control. Second, they enable micro-targeting of welfare beneficiaries and caste and community groups, raising concerns about transparency, since targeted messaging is difficult to monitor. Third, they intensify the risks of misinformation. The 2024 campaign saw the circulation of manipulated audio and video content, and the ECI issued advisories asking parties to avoid deepfakes and to remove flagged content promptly (ECI, 2024).

Digital tools have not replaced physical mobilisation. The Congress's Bharat Jodo Yatra (2022–2023) and Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra (2024), each covering thousands of kilometres, were designed for both ground contact and digital amplification. Survey evidence also suggests that exposure to digital political content varies across age, region, and income groups (Lokniti-CSDS, 2024), so contemporary campaigns layer digital channels onto older ones, namely television, rallies, and personal networks, rather than substituting for them.

10. Representation and Inclusion

A party's nature is also revealed by whom it nominates and elects. Table 5 shows that women's representation in the Lok Sabha rose from 10.9 percent in 2009 to 14.4 percent in 2019 but slipped to 13.6 percent in 2024, well below the one-third reservation promised by the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023. The Act reserves one-third of Lok Sabha and state assembly seats for women, but its implementation is linked to a post-census delimitation exercise, so its effects depend on the timing of that process. Meanwhile women have become more visible as voters, and parties across the spectrum now craft women-targeted transfers and services.

Religious minorities face a different pattern. Muslims constitute about 14 percent of the population (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011), but their share of Lok Sabha membership has hovered around 4 to 5 percent, and the BJP, the largest party, had no Muslim member in the 2024 Lok Sabha. Parties that compete for minority votes nominate more Muslim candidates, but the aggregate outcome reflects a broader pattern in which majoritarian mobilisation reduces the electoral incentive to field minority candidates (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Caste representation shows both change and continuity. Reserved constituencies guarantee Scheduled Caste (84 seats) and Scheduled Tribe (47 seats) presence in the Lok Sabha, and parties have increasingly recruited from non-dominant Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Dalit subgroups to widen their coalitions (Vaishnav & Hinton, 2019). However, in many parties leadership and control over resources remain concentrated among a narrow set of dominant groups. The demand for a national caste census, raised prominently by the opposition in 2024, reflects the persistence of caste as an axis of party competition.

11. Discussion

The evidence supports three broad conclusions about the changing nature of Indian parties. First, competition has become more nationalised at the top and more federalised beneath it. The BJP's national dominance coexists with regional parties' strength in many states, and voters separate national and state choices (Table 3). Second, parties have become more alike in organisational and financial practice even as their ideological appeals diverge: leader-centric, digitally mediated, welfare-oriented, and dependent on concentrated funding. Third, persistent gaps in internal democracy, financial transparency, and inclusion mean that parties' electoral vitality is not matched by institutional depth.

Table 6 summarises change along the five analytical dimensions. Continuity and change are mixed: what is new is the scale of dominance, the centrality of welfare and digital communication, and the concentration of funding, while dynasty, criminalisation, and regionalism are older features that have adapted rather than disappeared.

Table 6

Summary of Change in Indian Political Parties Across Five Dimensions

Dimension	1980s baseline	Contemporary pattern (2014–2025)
System competition	Congress dominance; BJP marginal	BJP-centred asymmetric system; coalition dependence after 2024
Ideology	Secular-developmental consensus challenged by caste and regional politics	Identity nationalism and beneficiary-based welfare competition
Organisation and leadership	Congress high command; charismatic regional leaders	Personalised leadership; cadre-based BJP; family-run regional parties
Finance	Cash-based, largely unrecorded donations	Concentrated donations; bonds struck down in 2024; opaque channels persist
Representation	Low share of women; reserved seats for SC and ST	Women about 14 percent; reservation legislated but not implemented; low Muslim share

Note. Source: Author's synthesis based on the sections above.

For federalism, the central question is whether a nationally dominant party can coexist with autonomous regional actors. The evidence suggests that it can, but on unequal terms: regional parties retain control of state governments and gain leverage when the national party lacks a majority, yet they face fiscal and organisational pressures as national welfare schemes and central resources shape state politics. For democratic quality, the concern is less the absence of competition, which the 2024 and state-level results demonstrate, than the unevenness of its conditions, since unequal access to funds, information channels, and institutional referees can tilt the field even when outcomes remain uncertain.

These findings qualify both optimistic and pessimistic readings. The 2024 verdict shows that voters can constrain a dominant party, that a fragmented opposition can coordinate, and that anti-incumbency remains potent; it also shows that a party can lose seats while retaining its vote base. Yet without reform, the conditions that reward money, personalisation, and identity mobilisation will persist. Three areas deserve priority: (a) a comprehensive party law mandating internal elections, transparent candidate selection, and audited accounts, in line with the Law Commission of India's (1999) recommendations; (b) disclosure and spending rules that replace the struck-down bond regime with real-time, donor-identifiable, and capped contributions; and (c) stronger incentives for inclusion, including timely implementation of women's reservation and disqualification of candidates against whom charges for serious offences have been framed, as recommended by the Law Commission of India (2014).

12. Conclusion

This paper has traced the changing nature of political parties in contemporary Indian politics. The party system has passed from Congress dominance through fragmented coalition politics to a BJP-centred asymmetric system whose 2024 iteration reintroduced coalition dependence without ending dominance. Beneath these electoral shifts, parties have reinvented themselves: ideology has moved toward identity and welfare delivery; leadership has become personalised; campaigning has become digital and data-driven; and finance has become concentrated, with electoral bonds exposing how far resources cluster

around the party in power. Older problems, namely dynasty, criminalisation, weak internal democracy, and the under-representation of women and minorities, have proved durable. Taken together, these trends show that the 2024 verdict marked a recalibration of the party system rather than a reversal of its underlying direction.

The hybrid-party thesis advanced here helps make sense of these patterns. Indian parties are catch-all in their electoral appeals, cartel-like in their resource dependence, and personalised in their leadership. This combination yields organisations that are electorally adaptive but institutionally thin, and whose accountability to members and citizens rests largely on periodic elections rather than on continuous internal or external oversight.

Future research could extend this analysis in three directions: state-level comparative studies of party organisation using membership and candidate-selection data; the effects of post-bond finance regimes on competition; and voter-level evidence on how welfare and identity appeals interact across social groups. As India approaches the delimitation and women's reservation exercises, and as a new generation of leaders emerges in national and regional parties, whether parties strengthen their institutional foundations will be central to the quality of Indian democracy.

REFERENCES:

1. Association for Democratic Reforms. (2024a). *Analysis of criminal background, financial, education, gender and other details of winners: Lok Sabha elections 2024*. <https://adrindia.org>
2. Association for Democratic Reforms. (2024b). *Analysis of income and expenditure of national parties: Financial year 2022–23*. <https://adrindia.org>
3. Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India, W.P. (C) No. 880 of 2017 (India Feb. 15, 2024).
4. Campbell-Smith, U., & Bradshaw, S. (2019). *Global cyber troops country profile: India*. Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford.
5. Chandra, K. (Ed.). (2016). *Democratic dynasties: State, party, and family in contemporary Indian politics*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Chaturvedi, S. (2016). *I am a troll: Inside the secret world of the BJP's digital army*. Juggernaut Books.
7. Chhibber, P. K. (1999). *Democracy without associations: Transformation of the party system and social cleavages in India*. University of Michigan Press.
8. Chhibber, P. K., & Verma, R. (2018). *Ideology and identity: The changing party systems of India*. Oxford University Press.
9. The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 (India).
10. Deshpande, R., Tillin, L., & Kailash, K. K. (2019). The BJP's welfare schemes: Did they make a difference in the 2019 elections? *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7(2), 219–233.
11. Election Commission of India. (2019). *General elections 2019: Statistical report*. <https://eci.gov.in>
12. Election Commission of India. (2024). *General election to Lok Sabha 2024: Results*. <https://results.eci.gov.in>
13. French, P. (2011). *India: A portrait*. Allen Lane.
14. Jaffrelot, C. (2021). *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*. Princeton University Press.

15. Jaffrelot, C., & Verniers, G. (2020). A new party system or a new political system? *Contemporary South Asia*, 28(2), 141–154.
16. Kapur, D., & Vaishnav, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Costs of democracy: Political finance in India*. Oxford University Press.
17. Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5–28.
18. Kirchheimer, O. (1966). The transformation of the Western European party systems. In J. LaPalombara & M. Weiner (Eds.), *Political parties and political development* (pp. 177–200). Princeton University Press.
19. Kohli, A. (1990). *Democracy and discontent: India's growing crisis of governability*. Cambridge University Press.
20. Kothari, R. (1964). The Congress "system" in India. *Asian Survey*, 4(12), 1161–1173.
21. Law Commission of India. (1999). *170th report on reform of the electoral laws*. Government of India.
22. Law Commission of India. (2014). *244th report on electoral disqualifications*. Government of India.
23. Lokniti-CSDS. (2024). *National Election Study 2024: Post-poll findings*. Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. <https://www.lokniti.org>
24. Palshikar, S. (2018). Towards hegemony: The BJP beyond electoral dominance. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(33), 36–42.
25. *Public Interest Foundation v. Union of India*, W.P. (C) No. 536 of 2011 (India Sept. 25, 2018).
26. Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). *Census of India 2011: Population by religious community*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
27. Ruparelia, S. (2015). *Divided we govern: Coalition politics in modern India*. Hurst & Company.
28. Sáez, L. (2002). *Federalism without a centre: The impact of political and economic reform on India's federal system*. Sage Publications.
29. Sircar, N. (2020). The politics of vishwas: Political mobilization in the 2019 national election. *Contemporary South Asia*, 28(2), 178–194.
30. Sridharan, E. (2014). India's watershed vote: Behind Modi's victory. *Journal of Democracy*, 25(4), 20–33.
31. Vaishnav, M. (2017). *When crime pays: Money and muscle in Indian politics*. Yale University Press.
32. Vaishnav, M., & Hinton, J. (2019). *The dawn of India's fourth party system*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
33. Wyatt, A. (2009). *Party system change in South India: Political entrepreneurs, patterns and processes*. Routledge.
34. Yadav, Y. (1999). Electoral politics in the time of change: India's third electoral system, 1989–99. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(34–35), 2393–2399.
35. Ziegfeld, A. (2016). *Why regional parties? Clientelism, elites, and the Indian party system*. Cambridge University Press.