

EMERGING ISSUES IN THE INDIAN PARTY SYSTEM: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Kirankumar D. Thorat

Assistant Professor

R.B. Narayanrao Borawake College, Shrirampur (Autonomous)

Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026 Keywords: <i>Opportunistic Alliances, Criminalization of Politics, Casteism, Communalization, Money Power, Personality Cult, Populism, Media Influence, Federalism, Delimitation and Caste Census.</i>	The Indian party system, rooted in the country's diverse socio-cultural fabric, has evolved from a one-party dominant model to a multi-party coalition framework, reflecting the nation's pluralism. However, emerging issues such as ideological erosion, criminalization, casteism, money power, personality cults, and the growing influence of regional parties pose significant challenges to democratic stability. Drawing from scholarly works like Dr. Sunita Rani's analysis and Dr. Tariq Ahmad Sheikh's retrospect, this paper examines these issues in the context of recent developments, including the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and impending 2026 state polls. As of 2026, strains on federalism due to delimitation, demands for a caste census, and persistent hate speech exacerbate fragmentation. External factors like globalization and media oligopoly further complicate the landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

In the world's largest democracy, political parties serve as the bedrock of governance, channelling public aspirations into policy. As Dr. Sunita Rani elucidates, parties are "groups organized for the purpose of achieving and exercising power within a political system," essential for mobilizing voters and ensuring accountability. From an Indian perspective, the party system embodies the nation's federal structure and social diversity, yet it grapples with emerging challenges that threaten its efficacy. Post-independence, the Indian National Congress dominated, but the system has transitioned to multi-partyism, marked by coalitions since 1989. Dr. Tariq Ahmad Sheikh highlights how globalization has induced "post-democracy," where corporate interests overshadow welfare, leading to imbalances. In 2026, with assembly elections looming in states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam, and Puducherry, issues like opposition disarray and BJP's southern ambitions underscore the system's fluidity. The 2024 elections, where the BJP secured 240 seats and formed the NDA government, signalled a return to coalitions, but 2025 witnessed deepening divides, with fractious discourse dominating.

This paper, from an Indian viewpoint, analyses historical evolution, key emerging issues, and prospects, emphasizing the need for reforms to preserve democratic vibrancy. It integrates insights from provided documents and recent analyses, highlighting how these issues impact governance and social cohesion.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE INDIAN PARTY SYSTEM

The genesis of India's party system traces back to colonial times, with parties forming in local institutions post-1883 and maturing under Government of India Acts. Post-1947, the Congress's dominance reflected its role in the freedom struggle, but cracks emerged in 1967 with state-level losses, leading to united fronts. The 1989 elections ended one-party rule, birthing unstable coalitions like V.P. Singh's National Front. The 1990s saw BJP's rise, leveraging Hindutva, while Congress splintered. Regional parties proliferated, embodying social pluralism-DMK in Tamil Nadu, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, and others.

By the 2000s, coalitions became normative: UPA (2004-2014) and NDA (2014 onward). Modi's 2014 and 2019 majorities briefly revived dominance, but 2024 reverted to coalitions, with BJP relying on allies like TDP and JD(U). In 2025, BJP consolidated with clear mandates in state polls, yet opposition fragmentation persisted. Dr. Rani notes the shift from ideological cohesion to fragmentation, with one-party dominance yielding to multi-party competition. Sheikh adds that pluralism-caste, religion, language-fuels this, but breeds instability. As 2026 approaches, the census delay until 2031 raises federal tensions, with southern states fearing seat loss due to slower population growth.

KEY EMERGING ISSUES IN THE INDIAN PARTY SYSTEM

Multi-Party Fragmentation and Regional Dominance

India's multi-party system, with over 2,500 parties, accommodates diversity but fosters instability. National parties like BJP, Congress, and CPI(M) depend on regionals for power. In 2024, regionals like TMC and SP influenced outcomes; in 2026, polls in southern states test BJP's expansion. Dr. Rani highlights the "large number of regional political parties" as natural in pluralistic India, yet they

prioritize parochial interests. Sheikh notes declining national party influence, with coalitions becoming opportunistic. Post-2024, NDA's stability hinges on allies, but 2025 saw internal tussles in states like Maharashtra.

Ideological Erosion and Opportunistic Alliances

Parties increasingly eschew ideology for power. Dr. Rani points to similar ideologies across parties, with elections issue-based since the 1980s. Alliances like BJP-BSP (2002) exemplify unprincipled ties. In 2025, deepening divides marked discourse, with BJP pushing reforms amid opposition disarray. Demands for caste census could fracture BJP's Hindu base, a key 2026 issue. Sheikh warns of "post-democracy," where corporate interventions tilt priorities.

Factionalism, Defections, and Criminalization

Internal factions plague parties, leading to splits-Congress's multiple divisions. Anti-defection laws (1985, amended 2003) curb but don't eliminate this. Criminalization remains rampant; over 40% of MPs face charges. Dr. Sheikh calls politics the "last refuge of scoundrels," with violence rising. In 2025, CAG flagged unverified transfers worth thousands of crores, fuelling corruption.

Casteism and Communalization

Caste influences voting and candidate selection, intensified post-Mandal (1990). Slogans exploit divisions; states like Bihar and UP remain caste-war hotspots. Communalization persists, with 2024 campaigns featuring hate speech against Muslims. Dr. Rani notes religious parties; Sheikh highlights thousands of clashes. In 2025, renewed Manipur violence killed 11, with protests clashing with forces. Jammu & Kashmir's 2024 polls marked progress, but detentions like Sonam Wangchuk's underscore tensions.

Money Power and Personality Cults

Elections cost crores, often via black money. Dr. Sheikh notes rich controlling politics, breaching limits. Personality cults dominate; parties revolve around leaders like Modi. Dr. Rani cites leader-named parties; in 2025, BJP's recovery tied to Modi's image.

Media Role and Populism

Media shape's opinion but is oligopolistic, promoting cronyism. Dr. Rani sees populist slogans misleading; Sheikh warns of corporate-media nexus. In 2026, media's gatekeeping will influence elections, amid concerns over electoral integrity.

Federalism and Delimitation

Emerging is the representation crisis: post-2026, 2031 census will reallocate seats, disadvantaging south. Interstate migration and wealth gaps strain federalism.

Prospects and Recommendations

As India approaches 2026 elections, the party system faces tests: Left's existential crisis in Kerala/West Bengal, BJP's Hindutva in south. Opposition unity remains elusive. From an Indian perspective, reforms are imperative: enforce internal elections, regulate funding, decriminalize via fast-track courts. Strengthen ECI for transparency. Ideological revival and youth engagement can counter fragmentation. Ultimately, the system must evolve to uphold constitutional values, ensuring equitable representation amid diversity. Failure risks deeper divides; success fortifies democracy.

CONCLUSION

India's party system has evolved from Congress dominance to a vibrant multi-party and coalition era, truly reflecting the nation's rich diversity. Yet serious challenges persist-ideological erosion, criminalization, money power, casteism, communal polarization, personality cults, and federal tensions over delimitation and caste census. As 2026 state elections approach, opportunistic alliances and regional fragmentation threaten stability. Still, Indian voters have repeatedly shown maturity, as seen in the 2024 verdict. Strict decriminalization, transparent funding, internal party democracy, and stronger ECI action are need of hour. Only by rising above narrow interests can parties strengthen democracy, uphold constitutional values, and ensure inclusive, equitable governance for all.

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