



| Indian Politics: Institutions, Political Development, and Contemporary Challenges

Abstract

Indian politics is shaped by the country's constitutional democracy, social diversity, federal political structure, and long history of political mobilization. Since independence in 1947, India has developed one of the world's largest democratic systems, characterized by regular elections, a multiparty political environment, an independent judiciary, and a constitutionally defined division of powers between the Union and the states. The political system has also undergone significant transformation, moving from a period of Congress Party dominance to increasingly competitive coalition politics and, more recently, a period in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has become the principal national political force. This report examines the historical evolution of Indian politics, the functioning of major political institutions, the role of political parties and elections, federalism, identity politics, and major contemporary challenges. It argues that Indian democracy has demonstrated considerable institutional resilience while continuing to face important questions concerning representation, political accountability, social inequality, and the relationship between democratic institutions and political power.

1. Introduction

India is a parliamentary democratic republic governed by the Constitution of India, which came into effect on 26 January 1950. The political system combines representative democracy with federalism, constitutional government, universal adult suffrage, and an independent judiciary. India's enormous geographical size and social diversity make its political system particularly significant for the study of comparative politics.

Indian politics cannot be understood solely through national institutions. Political competition takes place simultaneously at the national, state, and local levels. Language, religion, caste, ethnicity, region, class, and economic interests can all influence political behavior and electoral outcomes. Consequently, Indian politics is characterized by both national political debates and highly diverse regional political cultures.

The development of Indian democracy has not been linear. The country has experienced periods of dominant-party government, coalition politics, political centralization, major social movements, and substantial electoral competition. Nevertheless, elections have remained central to the political system, providing citizens with mechanisms for choosing governments and expressing political preferences.

2. Historical Development of Indian Politics

2.1 The Independence Movement

Modern Indian politics was strongly influenced by the independence movement against British colonial rule. The Indian National Congress, established in 1885, gradually developed from an organization seeking

greater political representation into the principal movement for independence.

Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, B. R. Ambedkar, and others contributed to the political and intellectual foundations of independent India. The independence movement introduced ideas of mass political participation, constitutionalism, civil rights, and national self-government.

India became independent on 15 August 1947. The partition of British India into India and Pakistan resulted in enormous population displacement and communal violence, creating profound challenges for the new Indian state.

2.2 The Congress-Dominant Era

The first decades after independence were characterized by the dominance of the Indian National Congress. Jawaharlal Nehru served as India's first prime minister from 1947 until 1964. During this period, the government emphasized parliamentary democracy, secularism, economic planning, industrialization, and non-alignment in foreign policy.

Although Congress dominated national politics, elections were competitive and opposition parties operated within the constitutional framework. Congress itself functioned as a broad political coalition containing different ideological and regional interests.

Following Nehru's death, Congress continued to dominate national politics, but internal divisions and political conflicts increasingly affected the party.

2.3 The Emergency and Democratic Resilience

One of the most controversial periods in India's democratic history occurred during the Emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. Civil liberties were restricted, political opponents were imprisoned, and press freedoms were curtailed.

The Emergency ended in 1977, and elections resulted in the defeat of Congress at the national level. The peaceful electoral transfer of power demonstrated the importance of elections and constitutional institutions in India's political system. Congress returned to government in 1980, but the political landscape had become more competitive.

2.4 Coalition Politics and Political Transformation

From the late twentieth century, Indian politics increasingly moved toward coalition governments and stronger regional parties. Economic liberalization beginning in 1991 also transformed India's political economy.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, governments frequently depended on alliances among national and regional parties. Political parties representing particular states, linguistic communities, castes, or social groups gained considerable influence.

This period demonstrated the importance of India's federal structure. State-level political developments increasingly influenced national government formation.

2.5 The Rise of the BJP

The Bharatiya Janata Party emerged as a major national political force during the late twentieth century. Its growth was associated with Hindu nationalist politics, organizational expansion, leadership, and changing electoral coalitions.

Under Narendra Modi, who became prime minister in 2014, the BJP achieved major national electoral victories in 2014 and 2019. In the 2024 general election, the BJP remained the largest individual party but did not obtain a parliamentary majority by itself and therefore relied on coalition partners to form the government.

The contemporary period is therefore characterized by both strong national-level BJP influence and continued importance of regional parties and state-level political competition.

3. The Constitutional and Institutional Framework

3.1 The Constitution

The Constitution provides the fundamental framework of India's political system. It establishes the Union government, state governments, Parliament, judiciary, electoral institutions, and fundamental rights.

The Constitution also establishes principles such as equality before the law and protection against discrimination. Constitutional amendments and judicial interpretation have allowed the political system to respond to changing social and political circumstances.

3.2 Parliament

The Parliament of India consists of two chambers: the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha.

The Lok Sabha is the directly elected lower house and plays a central role in determining which political coalition forms the national government. The Rajya Sabha represents the states and Union territories and provides an additional legislative forum.

The parliamentary system means that the prime minister and Council of Ministers are politically accountable to the Lok Sabha.

3.3 The Executive

India has a parliamentary executive. The President is the constitutional head of state, while the prime minister is the head of government and exercises substantial executive authority through the Council of Ministers.

The political strength of the prime minister depends significantly on the government's support in the Lok Sabha. A government with a clear parliamentary majority generally has greater capacity to implement its legislative agenda, whereas coalition governments must negotiate with their partners.

3.4 The Judiciary

The Supreme Court of India is the country's highest judicial institution. India's judiciary plays an important role in constitutional interpretation, protection of fundamental rights, and resolving disputes between different levels of government.

Judicial review enables courts to examine whether government actions and legislation comply with constitutional principles.

4. Political Parties and Elections

Indian politics is characterized by a multiparty system. Political parties operate at both national and state levels.

Major national parties include the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress, while numerous regional parties play important roles in

particular states. Parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, All India Trinamool Congress, Samajwadi Party, Telugu Desam Party, and others have demonstrated the continuing significance of regional political organizations.

General elections are administered by the Election Commission of India. The Lok Sabha uses a first-past-the-post electoral system, in which candidates who receive the largest number of votes in individual constituencies are elected.

Elections have contributed to the expansion of political participation among historically marginalized communities. At the same time, electoral politics can involve substantial campaign spending, personality-centered campaigning, polarization, and extensive use of social media.

5. Federalism and State Politics

Federalism is one of the defining characteristics of Indian politics. The Constitution divides legislative and administrative responsibilities between the Union and the states, although India's system gives substantial powers to the central government.

State governments are particularly important because many issues affecting citizens directly—including education, public health, policing, agriculture, and local infrastructure—are substantially influenced by state-level policies.

Regional parties have therefore become important actors in Indian politics. They can influence national policy through coalition governments and parliamentary negotiations.

Federal political competition can also create tensions between the Union government and states over financial resources, administrative authority, legislation, and political priorities.

6. Identity and Social Cleavages

Indian politics is strongly influenced by social diversity. Caste, religion, language, ethnicity, and regional identity can shape political organization and electoral behavior.

6.1 Caste Politics

Caste remains an important factor in Indian political mobilization. Political parties frequently attempt to construct electoral coalitions across different caste communities. Affirmative-action policies and debates surrounding reservations have also been central to political competition.

The political mobilization of historically disadvantaged groups has contributed to greater representation for some communities, although caste inequality remains a significant social and political issue.

6.2 Religion and Secularism

Religion is another major dimension of Indian politics. The Constitution establishes a framework of religious freedom and equality, while political parties have adopted different approaches to the relationship between religion and the state.

Debates over Hindu nationalism, minority rights, secularism, and communal relations have become increasingly prominent in contemporary political discourse.

6.3 Language and Regional Identity

India's linguistic diversity has played a major role in shaping its federal structure. The creation and evolution of states along linguistic and regional lines helped accommodate different identities within the Indian Union.

Regional political movements demonstrate that national political identity in India often coexists with strong state and linguistic identities.

7. Economic Policy and Politics

Economic policy has been an important component of Indian political competition. India's early development strategy emphasized state-led economic planning and public-sector development. Beginning in 1991, economic reforms introduced greater liberalization, privatization, and integration with global markets.

Subsequent governments have generally retained market-oriented economic policies while combining them with welfare programs and state intervention.

Contemporary political debates include employment, inflation, rural development, agricultural policy, infrastructure, taxation, poverty reduction, and the distribution of economic growth.

The political significance of economic policy is particularly evident during elections, when voters assess governments based on employment opportunities, public services, welfare benefits, and perceptions of economic performance.

8. Contemporary Challenges

Indian democracy has achieved considerable durability, but it faces several challenges.

First, political polarization has become an increasingly important feature of public debate. Strong ideological disagreements can make political compromise more difficult.

Second, inequality and unequal access to political resources remain significant concerns. Economic and social inequalities can affect citizens' ability to participate equally in political life.

Third, misinformation and digital political communication have transformed political campaigning. Social media provides parties with new ways to communicate with voters but also creates opportunities for misinformation and manipulation.

Fourth, institutional accountability remains an important subject of debate. The independence and effectiveness of institutions such as the judiciary, election administration, media, and investigative agencies are essential to democratic governance.

Finally, the relationship between majoritarian politics and minority rights continues to generate significant political debate. Balancing majority preferences with constitutional protections for minorities is a central challenge for any diverse democracy.

9. Conclusion

Indian politics represents a complex combination of constitutional institutions, electoral competition, social diversity, federalism, and political mobilization. Since independence, India has experienced major transformations—from Congress dominance to coalition politics and the emergence of the BJP as a leading national political force.

Despite periods of political instability and institutional tension, India's electoral system and constitutional framework have provided mechanisms for political participation and peaceful changes in government. At the same time, contemporary Indian politics raises important questions concerning polarization, inequality, institutional independence, minority rights, political accountability, and the impact of digital communication.

The future development of Indian democracy will depend not only on electoral outcomes but also on the ability of political institutions to maintain constitutional principles, protect democratic participation, and accommodate India's considerable social and regional diversity.

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