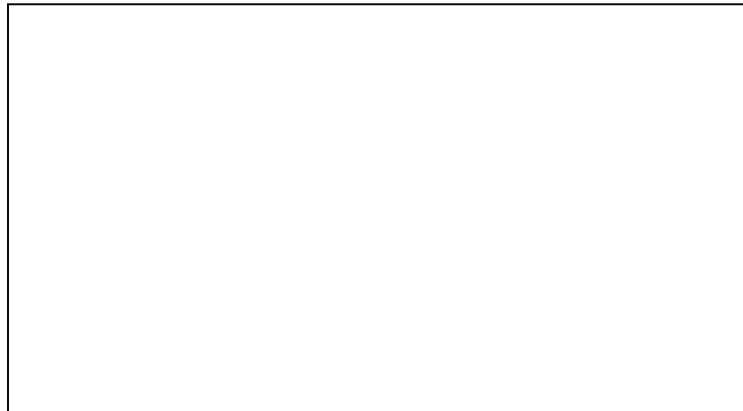# CONTINUITY WITH CHANGE:

SHIFTING PARADIGMS IN INDIA'S ELECTORAL POLITICS

Sandeep Shastri

Dean – Research and Social Science
International Academy for Creative Teaching
MATS University
52 Bellary Road, Bangalore 560 024 INDIA
Tel: +91 80 3545 246   Fax : +91 80 3545 247 email: sshastri@eth.net

I

The process of democratic engineering in India and the efforts to expand the democratic space have occupied the spotlight of attention in any analysis of elections in particular and Indian politics in general. In recent years, survey research has provided a window of opportunity to assess the multi-track factors that have contributed to the ushering in of a new phase of competitive democratic electoral politics across the country. This `new politics` has witnessed the Indian citizens asserting their `entitlement` in newer and more significant ways.

A wide range of social and political developments have, on the one hand been shaped by the changing power equations within the political system and have also influenced the nature, course and direction of electoral politics, on the other. The impact of social change on the working of the electoral process and political institutions, the more `inclusive` nature of electoral politics and participation, the end of one party domination and the emergence of a competitive party system, the reality of coalition politics, are all a reflection of this trend.

The political developments of the 1990s have clearly contributed to the `federalizing of electoral politics and the empowering of the Indian citizen` (Shastri 2001). A linked development is the more inclusive nature of Indian politics with the `electoral political arena (in the `1990s)… witnessing greater participation and more intense politicization than before` (Yadav 1999:2317). Its political implications are far reaching and central to the democratic theory debate in the country. This paper attempts to map independent India's electoral history and provide a framework for the analysis of the electoral politics over the last five decades. The basic hypothesis, which the paper explores, is that the shifting

paradigms of India's electoral politics are firmly rooted in the desire to ensure continuity with change. This paper is divided into four sections. After a brief overview, the second section flags the major milestones in the growth and maturity of India's electoral democracy. The third section examines recent trends (since the 1990s) in India's electoral politics and locates the debate in the wider context of the evolution and development of electoral politics in a diverse democratic polity. The fourth section attempts a final overview of the issues highlighted in the paper.

II

Five decades of electoral politics in post –Independence India (1952-2003) has witnessed 13 elections to the lower house of the national legislature and an equal number of elections at the state level[1]. For a meaningful analysis of the developments in India's electoral politics, over the last five decades, four clear phases can be delineated: a) 1952 (First General Elections after Independence) - 1967; b) 1967 – 1977; c) 1977- 89; and d) 1989 to the present. Important developments in three crucial years permit the clear demarcation of these four phases. 1967 saw, for the first time, the defeat of the Congress party in several states of India. In 1977 the Congress faced its first defeat at the federal level and the country saw the formation of a non-Congress government and 1989 marked the end of one party domination in electoral politics. Interestingly, all three developments are linked to the electoral fortunes of the Congress party![2]

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[1] In all states and union territories taken together 285 elections have been held since 1952. In no state – save Uttar Pradesh, have the number of state elections been more than the elections to the lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha)

[2] A slightly modified classification of the electoral politics of post Independence India is offered by Yadav(1999), who identifies the clear emergence of three electoral systems. For him, the elections held between 1952 and 1967 are part of the first electoral system. The hallmark of these elections was their non-competitive nature. The second electoral system commenced in 1967 and ended in 1989. It was characterized by a serious challenge to the hegemony of the

Electoral politics in the first phase, often referred to as the Nehruvian[3] phase, was marked by one party domination at the national level and in most of the states of India. The competition was invariably between the all powerful Congress party and regionally fragmented minor opposition groups. The Congress party too, underscored the inevitability of centralization of power to ensure `nation building`. This phase witnessed the gradual – yet steady – thinning down of the line of distinction between party and government (Shastri 1991: 15). Electoral politics, in this phase, saw an attempt to forge a `broad consensus` on issues, which resulted in what, Kothari had referred to as the `Congress system`. The consensus became possible because of the high level of legitimacy of the `national political elite` and the coalition of diverse social groups that was brought together in that period. The low level of mobilization among the depressed social groups also facilitated this process.

The second phase (1967-77) was witness to increasing tensions between the contestants/parties in the electoral fray on account of the breakdown of the consensus culture that had been so evident in the earlier years. New social alliances across caste groups emerged at the state level and often dictated the nature and direction of electoral outcomes. Non-Congress governments[4] were voted to power in the states on the one hand and Indira Gandhi attempted to

Congress party and the emergence of new social alliances in politics. Yadav does not separate the post-1977 politics from the previous phase (as this paper does) and argues that the defeat of the Congress at the national level in 1977 is merely a continuation of the electoral trends inaugurated by the 1967 elections. The third electoral system commenced with the 1989 elections and 1991 saw the clear inauguration of the new system. This system was marked by genuine multi-party competition – *a la* post-Congress polity.

[3] Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of India and was in office from 1947 –64.

[4] Till 1989, political parties other than the Congress party were referred to as non-Congress parties. This was reflective of the center stage occupied by the Congress in Indian politics.

increasingly assert her authority within the Congress party on the other[5]. The constitutional provisions were systematically misused and the values that governed the functioning of political institutions were greatly undermined. This phase also ushered in the trend of frequent elections in some states of India, triggered off by instability of state governments in view of their fluid legislative majorities on the one hand and increasing interference of the federal governments in state politics on the other.

The victory of the Janata Party in the 1977 national elections, was heralded by many as the emergence of a new and welcome phase in India's electoral politics. It was hoped that the developments of 1977, was an expression of the clear emergence of a truly competitive electoral system. Kothari has succinctly articulated the changes that were underway in the country:

> An electoral democracy that had … broadened its social base and shown special regard for diverse types of minorities and hence gained so much legitimacy got eroded over time and forced the political manages to compromise with …monied and mafia interests… The erosion of parliamentary, party and federal institutions and decline of authority of the State and of the national political leadership has also been one of the reasons for the rise of new actors on the scene, new forms of political expression and new definitions of the content of politics.
>
> (Kothari 1988 :28, 175)

It can be argued that the process of democratic re-engineering which the developments of 1977 sought to usher in were reversed as a result of the electoral politics of the early 1980s, with the return of the Congress party to power at the national level and in many of the states. It appeared as if, a non-Congress government at the national level, was a mere brief `aberration` to

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[5]   Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister in 1966 and continued as Prime Minister till 1977, returning to power again from 1980 to 1984.

Congress monopoly. However, a deeper analysis of the nature of electoral competition in the 1980s reveals, that the `historic elections of 1977` had ushered in certain irreversible trends.   The halo of `invincibility of the Congress` at the national level had now disappeared and it was no longer now perceived as the natural and inevitable choice of the electorate, either nationally or regionally. The capacity of the non-Congress parties to forge and sustain a united front against the Congress was now seen as the key to challenge Congress domination (Yadav 1999:2394). The `Index of opposition unity`(IOU) as developed by Butler and Roy (1985), was an effective measure to explain the fluctuating fortunes of both the Congress and the non-Congress opposition.

The above developments provide the necessary backdrop for the analysis of Indian democracy in the 1990s. The politics of this decade has clearly seen the impact of social change on political/electoral processes. With the democratic process `seeping downwards`[6], new social/political alliances have been formed and this has permanently altered the landscape of India's electoral politics. The end of one party domination and the emergence of a competitive party system are merely a reflection of this trend. The states in India have emerged as the epi-center of Indian politics and have become the effective arena for political/electoral choice. This shift in the `centre of gravity` of electoral politics has also necessitated a searching second look at the role that citizen perception of democratic processes and institutions has played in ushering in the above changes. The electoral politics of the 1990s is assessed in depth in the next section.

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[6] The implication here is that social groups which had earlier been denied their rightful role in the political/electoral process, were now demanding their legitimate share of the `political cake`

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III

The 1990s were verily a decade of frequent elections. This decade provided an opportunity to the Indian voter to express his/her preference in four national elections held in quick succession[7]. However, what needs to be stressed is that the 1990s was a period of `political transition` and each electoral outcome provided ample proof of the clear emergence of a `phase of genuine and irreversible competitive electoral politics`.   The 1990s also witnessed the empowering of the Indian voter in `newer and more significant ways`. To illustrate this point, it would be useful to analyse survey data from a multi-track perspective.

The data emerging from the fourth wave of the Indian segment of the World Values Survey[8] sheds more light on the changing attitude of the Indian citizen to the wider issues that have shaped the course and direction of Indian democracy in general and the dynamics of electoral politics in particular.

The support for maintaining and further stabilising a vibrant democratic political system was clearly apparent in the stand of the respondents, when asked to evaluate democracy as a way of governing the country. More than half the respondents who took a stand on the issue, opined that a democratic political system was very good while another 41 % felt that it was a fairly good political

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[7] Each of these elections was caused by the pre-mature dissolution of the Lok Sabha - save in 1996 – on account of the inability of any political party/alliance to form a stable government.

[8] The World values Survey is a worldwide investigation of social, cultural and political change. Representative national surveys of the basic values and beliefs of publics in more than 65 societies on all six inhabited continents, containing almost 80 percent of the world's population. It builds on the European Values Surveys, first carried out in 1981. A second wave of surveys, designed for global use, was completed in 1990-1991, a third wave was carried out in 1995-1996 and a fourth wave is taking place in 1999-2002. This investigation has produced evidence of gradual but pervasive changes in what people want out of life, and the basic direction of these changes is, to some extent, predictable. This project is being carried out by an international network of social scientists. For details see www.worldvaluessurvey.com; Inglehart 1977, 1990, 1997. The India component of the World Values Survey, was coordinated by Bangalore University and the author was the Coordinator of the Study.

arrangement. 7 % of the respondents had misgivings about the effectiveness of democracy as a form of political organisation[9] (Figure 1).

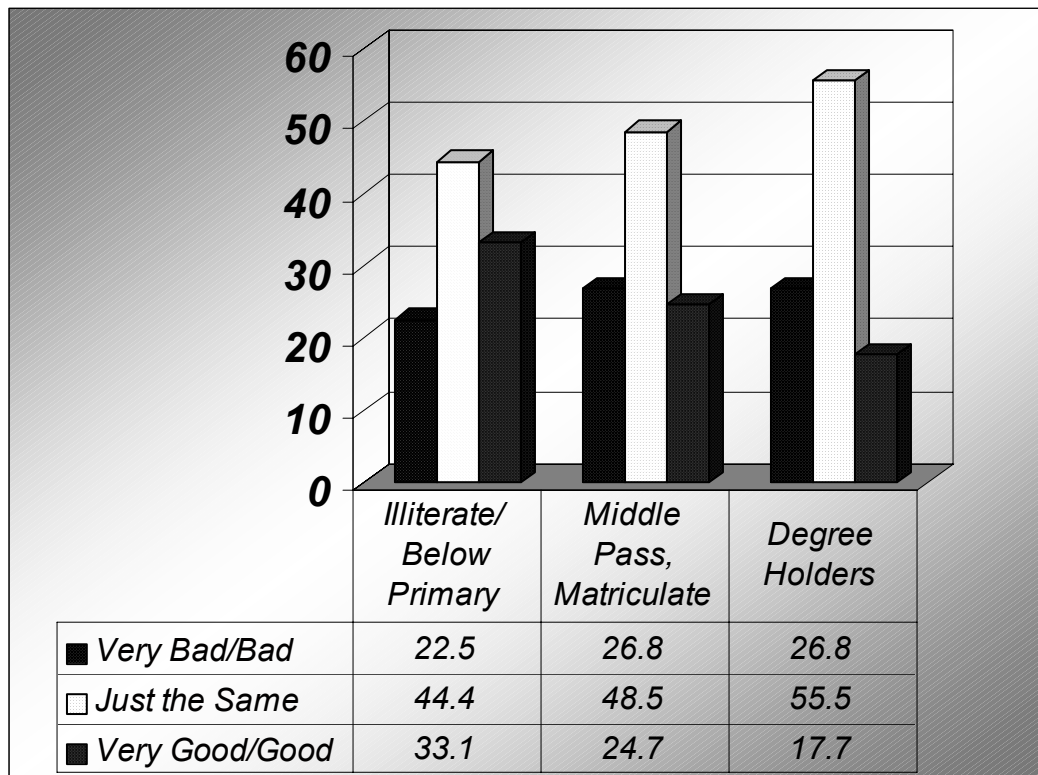*Figure 1*

HAVING A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM

The overwhelming support for democracy was consistently evident across diverse social and economic groups and every region of the country. The efforts in the recent past, to expand the democratic space in India, appear to have had a major impact on citizens` confidence in the democratic process. It is also important to note that there are significant variations in the attitude of citizens towards the political system today as compared to ten years ago, depending on the education level. Among those, who view the political system of today as being much better off than what it was ten years ago, there are more likely to be those who are illiterate and have had little formal education as compared to those who have had the benefit of higher education (Figure 2). Conversely, the cynicism about the working of the political system increases as the level of education of the respondent improves.

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[9] It is important to record the fact that the negative response to democracy as a form of political organization is significantly high in India when data from other democratic systems is analysed.

Figure 2

POLITICAL SYSTEM TODAY AS COMPARED TO TEN YEARS AGO
Response across educational levels

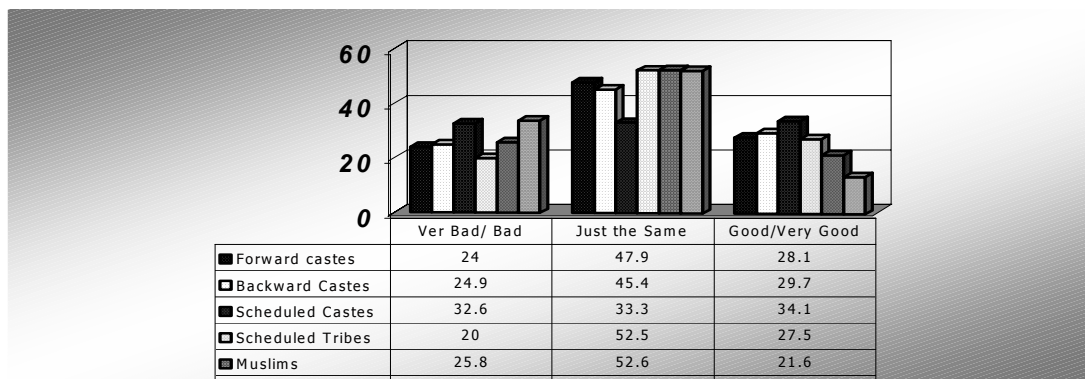|	Illiterate/ Below Primary	Middle Pass, Matriculate	Degree Holders
■ *Very Bad/Bad*	22.5	26.8	26.8
□ *Just the Same*	44.4	48.5	55.5
■ *Very Good/Good*	33.1	24.7	17.7

When viewed in terms of the response of different social groups[10], the political system as it has developed today, is endorsed more by the backward castes and the scheduled castes as compared to the forward castes. It is also interesting to note that in the case of all the groups save, the scheduled castes, a majority of the respondents who expressed an opinion on the subject opined that the

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[10] In the study, the caste group of the respondents was ascertained. For the purpose of the study, the social groups have been classified into Forward Castes (which includes the Upper Castes and other Dominant castes), Backward Castes (educationally and socially backward social groups), Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes , Muslims and others.

political system today is just the same as it was ten years ago. A significantly larger number from among the scheduled castes have taken a clear stand of either being appreciative or critical of the present political system, resulting in a clear three way split of the opinion of scheduled castes on the issue. (Figure 3).

Figure 3

POLITICAL SYSTEM TODAY AS COMPARED TO TEN YEARS AGO:

Response across caste groups

	Ver Bad/ Bad	Just the Same	Good/Very Good
■ Forward castes	24	47.9	28.1
□ Backward Castes	24.9	45.4	29.7
■ Scheduled Castes	32.6	33.3	34.1
□ Scheduled Tribes	20	52.5	27.5
▣ Muslims	25.8	52.6	21.6

Studies in the past too, have drawn attention to similar trends. A CSDS Survey in 1967 had posed the question to voters in India as to whether their vote made a difference. 48 % stated that their vote made a difference. In 1998 when the same question was posed as part of the National Election Study, as many as 59 % responded that their vote mattered (Yadav 1996). The study also found that among the marginalised social groups there is a significant rise in their `sense of efficacy` and they are involved today in more `active forms of political participation` (Yadav 1999 :2397 also see Mitra and Singh 1999; Palshikar and Deshpande 1999; Shastri 1999a; Heath 1999). The nation has also been witness to the trend of those higher in the social hierarchy demonstrating greater cynicism about the political process, while the socially and educationally

underprivileged expressing greater support and commitment to it. Indian democracy has witnessed a participatory upsurge, especially among the hitherto marginalised social groups and the survey data too provides evidence of this trend. The changing contours of India's electoral politics are, in significant ways, a reflection of this new assertion among the socially and economically underprivileged sections of Indian society.

Yet another trend that the electoral politics of the 1990s has witnessed is the emergence of the state/region as the focal point of electoral choice and articulation of political preferences. The results of the National Election Study `96, 98, `99, coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), clearly indicate that the electoral inclinations of citizens are defined largely by local and regional factors and compulsions. A linked trend is the polarization, which Indian politics has witnessed at the state level. While nationally, India has seen the emergence of a multi-party system, at the state and constituency level, there is a bi-polar or at the most a tri-polar electoral contest.

Voters at the state/constituency level have reduced the effective competition to 2 or 3 major political players. This implies that the voter choice at the local/state level is very clearly articulated. However, when this is aggregated nationally, the number of effective players dramatically increases – a near `multiple bi-polarity` (Sridharan 2001). The political preferences that voters are indicating at the state level vary significantly from one state to another, resulting in the need for coalitions at the federal level. As a result, electoral alliances are forged keeping in mind the dynamics of state politics resulting in interesting inclusions and surprising exclusions (Shastri 1999b). The new pattern of electoral outcomes does not represent a political fragmentation of the Indian electorate, but mirrors

state specific electoral verdicts. With the rise of state-wide parties, `political loyalties, opinions and social identities are being articulated at the level of the state` (Yadav 1999: 2399). Several factors indicate this shift of the `epi-centre` of politics from the center to the state.

Figure 4

HOLDING OF ELECTIONS TO NATIONAL AND STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES IN INDIA (1989-2003)
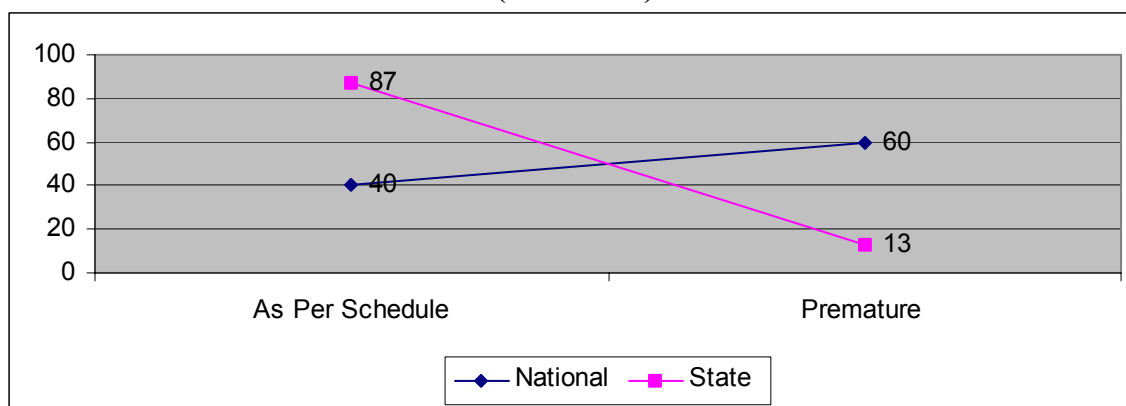

The fact that most states in India witness bi-polar or at the most tri-polar electoral contests is evident in the clear verdict emerging in state elections. Of the 86 different elections held to state legislatures in the period 1989-2003, as many as 75 (87%) were held as a result of the completion of the term of the house. Further, even in the case of the remaining 11 elections, only 4 (5%) were necessitated by the inability of any party/alliance enjoying a majority in the House. In the other 7 (8%) cases, premature elections were caused because of federal intervention involving the dismissal of the state government/ dissolution of the house requiring an early election to be held. On the other hand, at the national level, 3 of the 5 (60%) elections held in the same period (1989-2003) were caused by the premature dissolution of the House on account of no

party/alliance being in a position to form a stable government (See Figure 4). It is also important to record that in only one state of India – Uttar Pradesh, have the number of state assembly elections been more than the elections to the lower house of the national legislature[11]. Political instability in terms of frequency of elections, have been more pronounced at the national level, especially since 1989.

A linked factor explaining the `state based` nature of competition, is the fact that since 1989, in all the elections to the national legislature no single party has secured a majority of seats, if the results of these elections were to be broken up state wise, in most of the states (save on a few rare occasions in select states) the electoral results have clearly favoured a particular party/alliance.

Figure 5

`VOTER VOLATALITY` IN ELECTIONS TO STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES IN INDIA (1989-2003)

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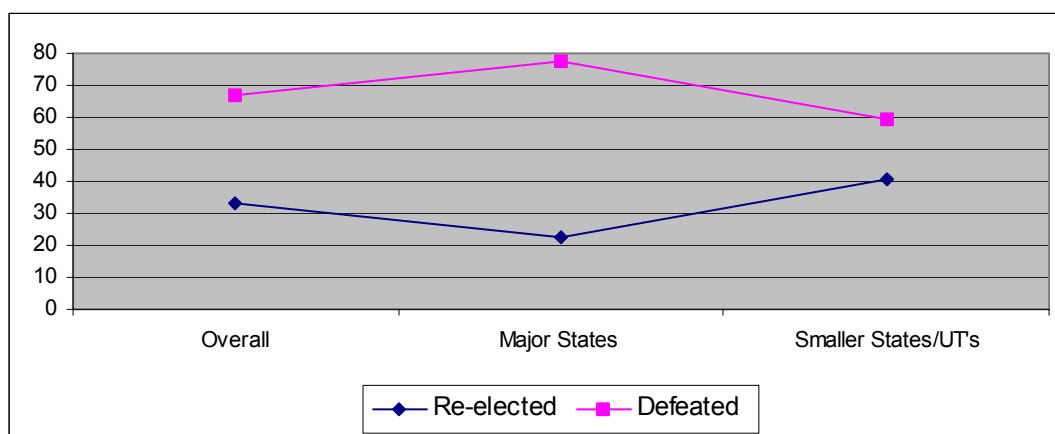
[11] See footnote 1

`Voter volatility` as expressed in terms of voters expressing their dissent against the ruling party/elected legislator, is today pronounced in national elections. Of the 5 national elections held since 1989, in 4 the ruling party at the time of the elections was voted out of power. This trend is an extension of developments at the state level. In the major states[12] of India, 49 elections have been held at the state level since 1989. In 38 of them (78%), the ruling party was voted out of power. In the smaller states of India and union territories (with legislative assemblies)[13], 37 elections have been held since 1989. In only 15 (40%) did the ruling party return to power[14](see Figure 5).

Elections since 1989 have also seen the `regionalisation of the national parties` and state based parties playing a major role in national politics. While the number of national parties has more or less remained the same in successive Lok Sabha's, the state based parties have been registering their presence in large number, especially after 1989 (see Figure 6). In 1998 and 1999, the number of state based parties has crossed 30. This is on account of the fact that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP consists of a large number of regional parties. It is interesting to note that the electoral support base of major national parties is also limited to certain regions. The BJP is in the electoral fray on its own volition (without a coalition partner) in not more than 9 states of India (less than one-third of the states). The Congress has a limited electoral presence in two of the largest states of India (UP and Bihar) and is today increasingly reconciling itself to aligning with powerful regional players (Maharashtra and Jammu and Kashmir is a case in point). The Janata Dal (all splinter groups) are

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[12] Those with 10 or more seats in the Lower House of the Federal Legislature – Lok Sabha (the House had 543 elected members). There are 17 states in this category.

[13] There are 11 states and 2 Union Territories in this category

[14] Yadav argues that competitive politics is yet to take off in the smaller states and union territories (1999:2396).

limited to one or two states. The two Communist parties too, have their electoral support base in not more than four or five states.

Figure 6

**NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PARTIES IN THE LOWER HOUSE OF THE
NATIONAL LEGISLATURE – LOK SABHA
(1952-2003)**
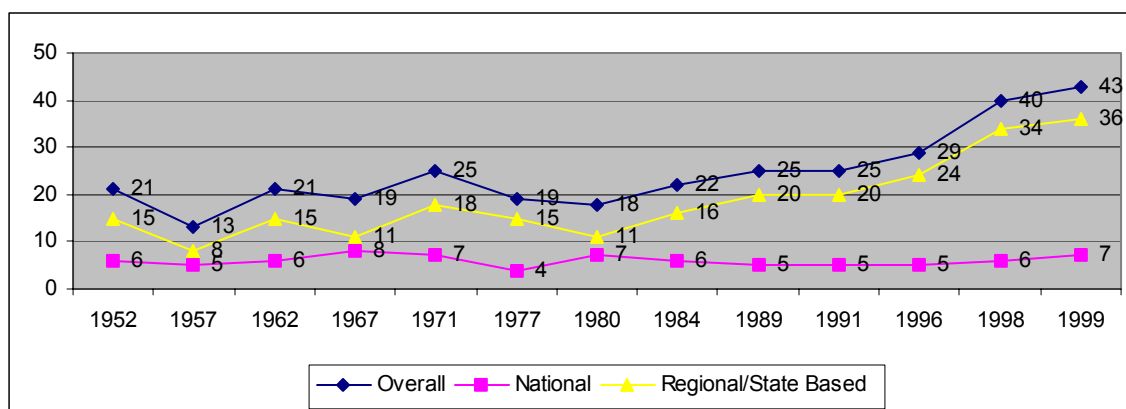
The `new language` of politics – the state as the arena for electoral contestatation - was succinctly articulated in the projections made by the coalitions groups, which have, came to power in the last decade. The Common Minimum Programme of the 13 party United Front Government (1996-98), promised an `alternative model of governance` based on `federalism, decentralisation, accountability, equity and social justice` (CMP 1996). The National Agenda for Governance (NAG), formulated by the BJP and its allies (1998-99), underscored the importance of the changing contours of Indian politics and stressed on the need for power sharing and providing more effective and meaningful opportunities for greater citizen participation in the democratic process (NAG 1998). The National Democratic Alliance (which came to power in 1999) promised to usher in `a new political age of reconciliation and accord` and

emphasised the need for setting `new parameters of purposeful governance` (NDA: 1).

The `centrality of the state` can also be discerned in citizen reactions to their expectations from the different levels of government in the delivery of public goods. An empirical study undertaken in 2001, to examine the 'quality of life' of the Indian citizen and their perception of individual and collective needs[15]. As part of the study, citizen response to the role of the state in providing select public goods was assessed. In any federal system the state can be represented either by the central, state, or local governments. Those respondents who had signaled that the state was to be the provider of public goods were asked whether it was the central government, the state government or local government that should provide these public goods. In India, citizens assigned clear and differential responsibility to the various levels of government within the federal system – central, state and local (including both rural and urban) and express clear opinions about which level of government is responsible for providing what public good.
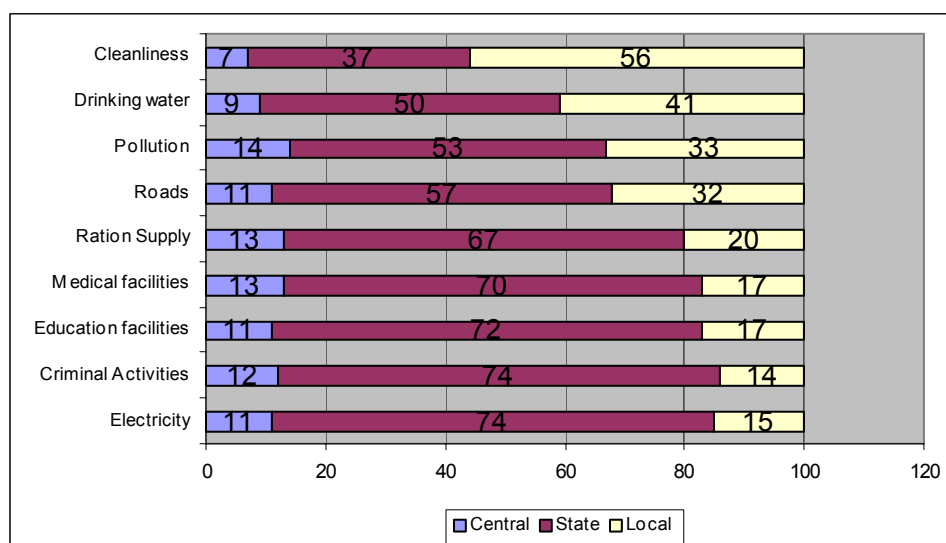
Only one in every ten respondents favoured a role for the central government. For the problems perceived as being most important, responsibility is clearly assigned by the Indian citizen to their state government (see Figure 7). This may explain why there has been such a high turnover in state governments over the last decade and half. Voters see the state government as responsible for

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[15] The survey was conducted as part of the `State and Society Project`, jointly coordinated by the Bangalore University, Ohio State University and the University of California, Berkeley with Dr Pradeep Chhibber, Dr Sandeep Shastri and Dr Richard Sisson as Principal Coordinators. A rigorous scientific methodology was employed to generate the sample for the survey. A target sample of 8388 citizens was identified and detailed face-to-face interviews were conducted. The survey was conducted in 18 states of India, which covered nearly 97% of the nation's population. The fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2001. For details see paper **`The State, voluntary Associations and the Provision of Public Goods in India`** www.polisci.berkeley.edu/Faculty/bio/permanent/Chhibber,P/publicGoods.pdf.

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providing a set of public goods. In so far as those public goods are still deemed as important by a vast majority of citizens, state governments have failed to address voters concerns. There are, however, three exceptions. Citizens felt that solving the problems linked to drinking water, roads and cleanliness was not the responsibility of the state government alone but that the local government too, had a significant role to play. The local government is seen as more important for the provision of these public goods than the central government. Local governments were also judged as having the primary responsibility for the cleanliness of the neighbourhood, and secondary responsibility for providing drinking water, control of pollution and maintenance of roads.

Figure 7

PROVIDING PUBLIC GOODS : ROLE OF CENTRAL. STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Category	Central	State	Local
Cleanliness	7	37	56
Drinking water	9	50	41
Pollution	14	53	33
Roads	11	57	32
Ration Supply	13	67	20
Medical facilities	13	70	17
Education facilities	11	72	17
Criminal Activities	12	74	14
Electricity	11	74	15

The electoral politics of the 1990s is clearly indicative of a new phase in the evolution and growth of India's democratic processes and institutions. The increased participation from diverse social groups, growth of the `politics of presence`, emergence of a competitive party system, centrality of the states in

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Indian politics and the increasing assertiveness of citizens as voters have all together contributed to the strengthening the vigour and vitality of the democratic process. These changes have brought in their wake, a series of challenges, which the system has had to confront. The inherent resilience of the democratic process has permitted the system to face the emerging challenges and carry forward the democracy project in the country.

IV

Five decades of experimenting with electoral politics and democratic governance permits a meaningful assessment of trends and developments. Over the years, the electoral system has adapted to the changing times even while retaining its original intended character. The first President of India, very rightly asserted that the decision of the framers of the Constitution to guarantee universal adult franchise was `an article of faith` in the wisdom and maturity of the electorate(CAD:VIII:634). Over the years, cynicism had been expressed in several quarters about the capacity of the large illiterate, impoverished Indian masses to judiciously   exercise their franchise. However, experience has shown that the faith that the founding fathers placed in the inherent capacities of the common Indian citizen was not misplaced. In recent years, the vibrancy and vitality of the electoral and democratic process has been largely on account of the enthusiasm and participation of the socially and economically underprivileged. The broadening of the base of political participation has been steady yet gradual. The electoral process has not been immune to the fundamental transformations taking place in society. In fact, it has reflected those changes. A more inclusive and participative electoral system has been the natural byproduct of this trend. The implications are far reaching and throw up new challenges. The dynamism and enthusiasm of the `newly enfranchised

groups` is met with `cynicism and excessive moralization` on the part of the traditional elite. Further, the emerging contradiction between the fact of political equality and the reality of socio-economic equality stares the system squarely in the face.

A little over five decades ago, when the nation embarked on its journey of ensuring growth with social justice within the shell of democracy, the task seemed uphill. In order to expand the democratic space, the framework of democracy had first to be protected. The initial years after independence saw an attempt by the political leadership to stabilize the democratic system and its attendant institutions. Though the first few decades after independence saw near one party domination, it did not seriously erode the democratic foundations of the polity (Shastri 1991). Over the years, the domination of the Congress came to be challenged through multi-track strategies ultimately resulting in the emergence of a competitive party system. It is important to note that the electoral process was the `site` at which all these changes were negotiated - peacefully, incrementally and without any major aberrations. The transition from a one party dominant system to a competitive party system has been democratically engineered.

The electoral development of the 1990s mirrors the multi-verse of Indian democracy and reflects the changing landscape of democratic politics even while emphasising the elements of continuity that contribute to the resilience of the political system.

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