

A moral force in politics?

The inspiration behind the following imaginary narrative is Shri Kishen Patnaik (1930–2004), also known as Kishenji. He was elected as a Member of Parliament from Sambalpur, Odisha in 1962.

What did Kishenji mean by an alternative political *formation*?

The question came up in a conversation between Sudha, Karuna, Shaheen and Gracy. All four women had led very powerful

people's movements in different parts of the country. They were meeting in a village in Odisha, away from their day-to-day struggles, to think afresh the future of people's movements.

The discussion naturally turned to Kishenji, who was regarded as a friend, political philosopher and moral guide by all the movement groups in the country. He had argued that people's movement should embrace politics openly. His argument was simple yet powerful. Movements focused on a single issue are suitable as long as we wish to achieve limited changes in a particular aspect of life. But if we wish to bring about a fundamental social transformation, or basic change even in one aspect of life, we would need a political organisation. People's movement must establish a new political formation to act as a moral force in politics. This was an urgent task, he said, because all the existing political parties had become irrelevant for social transformation.

"But Kishenji never clarified what that organisation will be. He talked of an alternative political *formation* or a third *force* in politics. But did he mean a political party?" said Gracy. She felt that an old style political party was not the right instrument for social change.

Sudha agreed with her. "I have thought about it several times. I agree that all the struggles that we are involved with – the struggle against displacement, against globalisation, against caste and gender oppression and for an alternative kind of development – all this is political.

But the moment we form a party, all the goodwill we have earned all these years will be lost. People will think of us as no different from other politicians."

"Besides", added Karuna, "we have seen that a lot can be achieved by putting pressure on the existing political parties. We tried putting up candidates in panchayat elections, but the results were not very encouraging. People respect our work, they even adore us, but when it comes to voting they go for the established political parties."

Shaheen did not agree with them: "Let us be very clear. Kishenji wanted all the people's movements to forge a new political party. Of course he wanted this party to be a different kind of a party. He was not for political alternatives, but for an alternative kind of politics."

Kishenji is no more. What would be your advice to these four activists? Should they form a new political party? Can a political party become a moral force in politics? What should that party be like?



In Class IX, we noted that in China, only the Communist Party is allowed to rule. Although, legally speaking, people are free to form political parties, it does not happen because the electoral system does not permit free competition for power. We cannot consider one-party system as a good option because this is not a democratic option. Any democratic system must allow at least two parties to compete in elections and provide a fair chance for the competing parties to come to power.

In some countries, power usually changes between two main parties. Several other parties may exist, contest elections and win a few seats in the national legislatures. But only the two main parties have a serious chance of winning majority of seats to form government. Such a party system is called two-party system. The United States of America and the United Kingdom are examples of two-party system.

If several parties compete for power, and more than two parties have a reasonable chance of coming to power either on their own strength or in alliance with others, we call it a multiparty system. Thus in India, we have a multiparty system. In this system, the government is formed by various parties coming together in a

coalition. When several parties in a multi-party system join hands for the purpose of contesting elections and winning power, it is called an alliance or a front. For example, in India there were three such major alliances in 2004 parliamentary elections— the National Democratic Alliance, the United Progressive Alliance and the Left Front. The multiparty system often appears very messy and leads to political instability. At the same time, this system allows a variety of interests and opinions to enjoy political representation.

So, which of these is better? Perhaps the best answer to this very common question is that this is not a very good question. Party system is not something any country can choose. It evolves over a long time, depending on the nature of society, its social and regional divisions, its history of politics and its system of elections. These cannot be changed very quickly. Each country develops a party system that is conditioned by its special circumstances. For example, if India has evolved a multiparty system, it is because the social and geographical diversity in such a large country is not easily absorbed by two or even three parties. No system is ideal for all countries and all situations.



I wonder how politicians manage these coalitions. I can't even remember the names of all the parties.



Let us apply what we have learnt about party systems to the various states within India. Here are three major types of party systems that exist at the State level. Can you find the names of at least two States for each of these types?

- Two-party system
- Multiparty system with two alliances
- Multiparty system

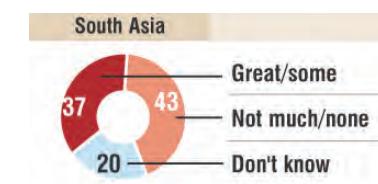
Popular participation in political parties

It is often said that political parties are facing a crisis because they are very unpopular and the citizens are indifferent to political parties.

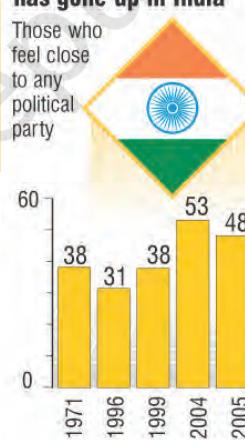
The available evidence shows that this belief is only

partly true for India. The evidence, based on a series of large sample surveys conducted over several decades, shows that:

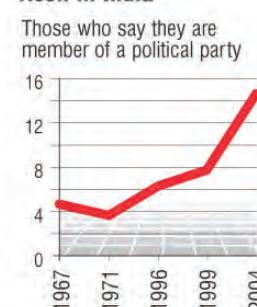
- Political parties do not enjoy much trust among the people in South Asia. The proportion of those who say their trust in political parties is 'not much' or 'not at all' is more than those who have 'some' or 'great' trust.
- The same is true of most other democracies as well. Political parties are one of the least trusted institutions all over the world.
- Yet the level of participation in the activities of political parties was fairly high. The proportion of those who said they were members of some political party was higher in India than many advanced countries like Canada, Japan, Spain and South Korea.
- Over the last three decades the proportion of those who report to be members of political parties in India has gone up steadily.
- The proportion of those who say they feel 'close to a political party' has also gone up in India in this period.



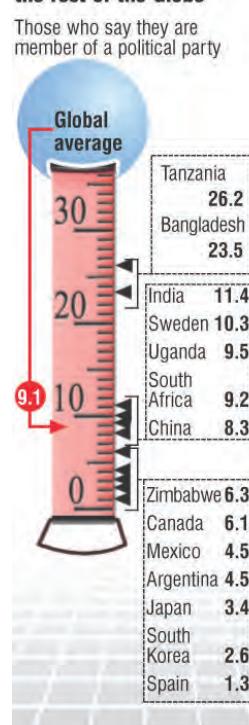
Despite fluctuations, party identification has gone up in India



Party membership has risen in India

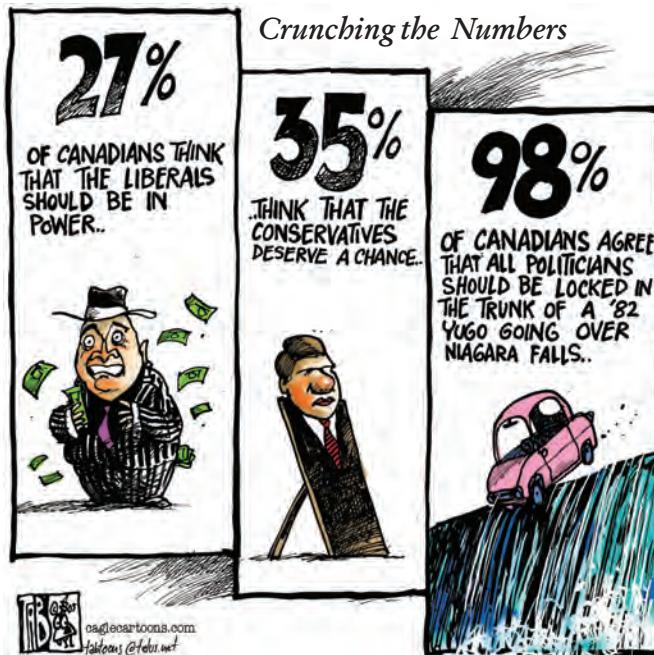


Party membership is higher in South Asia than the rest of the Globe



Source: SDSA Team, *State of Democracy in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007

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Does the cartoon reflect the data graphics shown on the previous page?

National parties

Democracies that follow a federal system all over the world tend to have two kinds of political parties: parties that are present in only one of the federal units and parties that are present in several or all units of the federation. This is the case in India as well. There are some country-wide parties, which are called ‘national parties’. These parties have their units in various states. But by and large, all these units follow the same policies, programmes and strategy that is decided at the national level.

Every party in the country has to register with the Election Commission. While the Commission treats all parties equally, it offers some special facilities to large and established parties. These parties are given a unique symbol – only the official candidates of that party can use that election symbol. Parties that get this privilege and some other special

facilities are ‘recognised’ by the Election Commission for this purpose. That is why these parties are called, ‘recognised political parties’. The Election Commission has laid down detailed criteria of the proportion of votes and seats that a party must get in order to be a recognised party. A party that secures at least six per cent of the total votes in an election to the Legislative Assembly of a State and wins at least two seats is recognised as a State party. A party that secures at least six per cent of the total votes in Lok Sabha elections or Assembly elections in four States and wins at least four seats in the Lok Sabha is recognised as a national party.

According to this classification, there were seven recognised national parties in the country in 2018. Let us learn something about each of these parties.

For more details about registration and recognition of political parties by the Election Commission of India, visit <https://eci.gov.in>



All India Trinamool Congress (AITC):

Launched on 1 January 1998 under the leadership of

Mamata Banerjee. Recognised as a national party in 2016. The party's symbol is flowers and grass. Committed to secularism and federalism. Has been in power in West Bengal since 2011. Also has a presence in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura. In the General Elections held in 2019, it got 4.07 per cent votes and won 22 seats, making it the fourth largest party in the Lok Sabha.



Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP):

Formed in 1984 under the leadership of Kanshi Ram.

Seeks to represent and secure power for the bahujan samaj which includes the *dalits*, *adivasis*, OBCs and religious minorities. Draws inspiration from the ideas and teachings of Sahu Maharaj, Mahatma Phule, Periyar Ramaswami Naicker and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Stands for the cause of securing the interests and welfare of the *dalits* and oppressed people. It has its main base in the state of Uttar Pradesh and substantial presence in neighbouring states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Delhi and Punjab. Formed government in Uttar Pradesh several times by taking the support of different parties at different times. In the Lok Sabha elections held in 2019, it polled about 3.63 per cent votes and secured 10 seats in the Lok Sabha.



Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):

Founded in 1980 by reviving the erstwhile Bharatiya Jana Sangh, formed by Syama Prasad Mukherjee in 1951. Wants to build a strong and modern India by drawing

inspiration from India's ancient culture and values; and Deendayal Upadhyaya's ideas of integral humanism and *Antyodaya*. Cultural nationalism (or 'Hindutva') is an important element in its conception of Indian nationhood and politics. Wants full territorial and political integration of Jammu and Kashmir with India, a uniform civil code for all people living in the country irrespective of religion, and ban on religious conversions. Its support base increased substantially in the 1990s. Earlier limited to north and west and to urban areas, the party expanded its support in the south, east, the north-east and to rural areas. Came to power in 1998 as the leader of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) including several regional parties. Emerged as the largest party with 303 members in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Currently leads the ruling NDA government at the Centre.



Communist Party of India (CPI):

Formed in 1925. Believes in Marxism-Leninism, secularism and democracy. Opposed to the forces of secessionism and communalism. Accepts parliamentary democracy as a means of promoting the interests of the working class, farmers and the poor. Became weak after the split in the party in 1964 that led to the formation of the CPI(M). Significant presence in the states of Kerala, West Bengal, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Its support base had gradually declined over the years. It secured less than 1 per cent votes and 2 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Advocates the coming together of all left parties to build a strong left front.



Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M):

Founded in 1964. Believes in Marxism-