



Role of Political Parties in the State Politics of Himachal Pradesh: Change and Continuity

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ABSTRACT

Since 1948, after the formation of Himachal Pradesh, Congress party has dominated the state politics till 1977. The elections 1977, held after the emergency period (1975-77), formed a non-Congress government in the state. In the late 1980s, when regional forces emerged in many states, the Indian party system shifted from a competitive party system to a multi-party system. Because of the nominal presence of other parties (national or state), Himachal adopted a rotational bi-party system. Since then, BJP and Congress (both national parties) enjoy hill peoples support. These parties have a significant impact on the state governance, electoral patterns, and political trends. Although there are many other national or small regional parties in the state, but both the national parties (Congress and the BJP) successfully satisfy the heterogeneous needs of the society. Based on secondary sources, the present paper highlights the emerging trends in state politics and continuity of bi-party system in the state.

Keywords: Electoral Politics, National Parties, State Politics, Bi-party System, Voting Behaviour.

Introduction

The growth and development of political parties are considered as an indispensable part of modern states. The study of political parties greatly contributes to the understanding of the political life of the public institutions. The party system has been, and continues to be shaped by a complex interaction of various sociological, institutional and contextual factors, (Diwaker, 2017). In a parliamentary democratic system, political parties play a crucial role in the political, governmental, and social process. They are the main lubricant and driving force behind them. (Sharma 1978: 1). As a result, the growth and operation of political parties comes to determine the stability of the political, social, and governmental systems. Analysis has focused on their involvement in governance, political mobilization, economic and social policy creation and implementation, (Hasan 2002: 4-5). In particular, it highlights that India's federal structure, electorate system and rules, as well as the presence of numerous overlapping social cleavages produce an environment of constant flux for the parties. They are the vital link that connects the state and society as well as the individual.

The diversities and social fragmentation of Indian society have produced a proliferation of regional and other political parties which often give to each state in the Indian Union a unique party system imperfectly integrated into the 'national party system', (Brass, 2020: 67). India experienced one dominant party system till 1967 (quoted 'Congress system' by Rajni Kothari), when Congress party ruled at national as well states. The changes coming in the Indian party system since the Fourth General Election in 1967, the period in Indian politics when ethnic parties and plebeian middle classes emerged on the scene, (Mehra, 2010: 42-43). It converted one party dominant system into a competitive party system at state level in the period 1967 to 1989. In this period Congress dominates the national politics (except the period of 1977-80), but face challenge in the many states due to the emergence of new regional forces in their respective states, Like Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, Shivsena in Maharashtra, Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam.

The early 1990s saw an aggression between mandal and Kamandal politics. Mandal indicates the reservation for the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and the Kamandal was the sign of religious politics, especially on the issue of construction of the Ram Mandir instead of Babri Masjid at the Ayodhya site. Thus, the Lok Sabha elections 1989 was historic, when the Indian party system entered into their third stage of multi-party system. These circumstances lead to the new phase in Indian party politics, which argued a 'third phase' of Indian politics by Yogendra Yadav (1999), in which many regional forces emerged on national level and a competitive party system developed into a multi-party system. Thus, after 1989, the party system marked decline in Indian National Congress (INC) dominance, rise of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), decline of Ideological boundaries, alliances and counter alliances and most importantly the prominent role to the regional political parties in national politics, (Diwaker, 2017: 159-160).

The role of national parties in Himachal Pradesh politics has been marked by both continuity and change over time. Himachal Pradesh, a small hill state in India, has seen national political parties—particularly the BJP and the INC—dominate the political landscape. These parties had a significant influence on the state's governance, electoral patterns, and political trends. Thus, here we give an analysis of the role of national parties in Himachal Pradesh, reflecting both the changes and continuities in the political scenario.

Historical Context

The political journey of Himachal Pradesh starts from the Praja Mandal movements. These are being treated here as indicators of the growth of political consciousness amongst the people's aspirations. The Himalayan Riasti Praja Mandal was organized in December 1939 and was made responsible for directing the activities of the political and social workers in numerous hill states, (Sharma, 1978: 26-27). By 1945 a network of Praja Mandals had been set up in the hill states of Himachal Pradesh. For the need of a strong organization, the Praja Mandal workers had been meeting at the session of All India State's People Conference (AISPC), had been reviewing the progress of the movement in their respective states and had been exchanging ideas as to the methods and measures of dealing with the common problems. One of the outcomes of this meeting was to set up a regional council called Himalayan Hill States Regional Council. HHSRC was a great milestone in the growth of political consciousness and development of a political organization covering these hill states, (Ibid., 56). When the Interim Council decided to hold elections for Vidhan Parishad in October 1947, the Praja Mandal led by Satyadev Bushahri decided to contest the elections. The Praja Mandal candidates won all the seats. It called upon the state ministry, Government of India to intervene.

Himachal Pradesh emerged on the map of India on April 15, 1948 by merging 30 small and big princely states. Originally it had an area of 27018 sq. km. with only four districts namely, Mahasu, Sirmour, Mandi and Chamba, (Alhuwalia, 1998: 2). It became Part 'C' state on January 26, 1950 with the implementation of the Constitution of India. On November 1, 1956 it became a Union Territory (UT). The Legislative Assembly was replaced by the territorial council on August 15, 1957, headed by Karam Singh Thakur. Consequently, in 1963 democratic setup was restored to Himachal Pradesh under the Territorial Council, elected on universal adult suffrage in 1962, was converted into Legislative Assembly and Dr Yashwant Singh Parmar was once again elected the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh along with two ministers namely, Karam Singh Thakur and Hari Das on July 1963. Although the democratic set up was a milestone for the Himachalis, yet the final goal still remained to be achieved. The hill people decided to continue their struggle for 'Vishal Himachal' and a separate independent entity. Finally, the Indian Parliament passed the Punjab Reorganisation Act of 1966. As a result of this Act, the hilly areas of Punjab i.e., Kullu, Kangra, Shimla, Lahaul & Spiti, Nalagarh, Una were merged with Himachal Pradesh at the time of the linguistic reorganisation of Punjab into being on November 1, 1966, (Sharma, 1999). On December 18, 1970, the State of Himachal Pradesh act was passed by the Parliament and a new state came into existence on January 25, 1971 and became 18th state of the Indian Union. The metamorphosis of Himachal Pradesh from a backward hill state to one of the most developed states in the country has been truly remarkable.

Role of Political Parties and Continuation in Bi-party System

After the formation of Himachal Pradesh as a full-fledged state in 1971, the Congress party played a dominant role in state politics, reflecting the national trend where the Congress had a strong presence across India. The Congress-led governments were stable, and party loyalty was high. Although there were other parties, like Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), Communist Party of India (CPI), Swatantra Party, that participated in the assembly elections, their small number had no effect on the state's political landscape. The alternative was then made possible by the establishment of the Janata Party in 1977. The Janata Party (JP) gained a majority in the state but three years later after its formation, the government was dissolved by Indira Gandhi's government when they came to power at centre in 1980, after the failure of the Janata party coalitions. Although the Congress party came back to power in the 1980s it faced serious challenges at national as well as state level. Many regional forces emerged on the national arena, and Congress dominance at national level came to an end. The 1990s saw the arrival of the Congress-opposition party system in the Indian states and the electoral contests remained mainly between the Congress and the state level parties, or in some cases even triangular contests between the Congress, BJP and state level parties. Unlike many states, the politics in Himachal has

been bipolar for about 40 years with the Congress and the BJP being the chief protagonists, (Thakur, 2017). In Himachal the decline of the Congress monopoly led to a relative success for the BJP and the 'Single party dominant system' shifted to the 'two-party Rotation' in the state, (EPW, 2008). Himachal is such a state where state level parties have not succeeded in 'post-Congress polity'.

Despite the dominance of Congress and BJP, Other national parties, such as the Communist Parties and Communist Party of India (Marxist), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have attempted to carve a space for themselves in the state's political landscape. However, these parties have struggled to gain significant traction compared to the national giants. There are some minor state level parties that followed this pattern, were the Lok Raj Party Himachal Pradesh (LRHP) in 1972, Himachal Kranti Party (HKP) in 1993, Himachal Vikas Congress (HVC) in 1998, Loktantrik Morcha Himachal Pradesh (LMHP) in 2003, Himachal Swabhiman Party (HSP) and Himachal Lokhit Party (HLP) in 2012, Bharatiya Himachal Jan Vikas Party (BHLJVP) in 2017 and recently formed Rashtriya Devbhoomi Party (RDP) in 2022, (Palnata, 2020). Thus, both the national parties (Congress and the BJP) successfully satisfy the heterogeneous needs of the society and no third alternate on the basis of traditional factors have been able to occupy space in the Himachal politics.

However, some regional parties made inroads into state politics but they did not make the momentum. Such parties are HVC and HLP. Himachal Vikas Congress was formed in 1998 by the late Pandit Sukh Ram, a former central cabinet minister and a veteran Congress leader from Mandi. It succeeded to win four Assembly seats in the 1998 assembly elections and give their support to BJP to form the government. Even it win one Parliamentary seat in the Lok Sabha elections 1999 on seat sharing formula with BJP. Its leader Dhaniram Shandil won the Shimla Parliamentary reserved seat. Its leaders later merged with either Congress or BJP just before the 2003 assembly elections. Himachal Lokhit Party (HLP) was founded by a few rebels of the BJP before the 2012 state Assembly elections. Maheshwar Singh was its party president. The party contested the 2012 assembly elections with thirty-three candidates but only Maheshwar Singh was elected. After this, in august 2016, half of the party merged back with the BJP and in October 2016, the rest of its members joined Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Thus, two party competitive politics in the state has been well entrenched since the 1990s and no third front or regional party has gained an electoral competitive strength so far, (Chauhan and Ghosh, 2004). The bipolar contest between the BJP and the Congress in Himachal Pradesh is also evident from the fact that the combined votes polled to these two major parties in Lok Sabha as well as state assembly elections were about 95 per cent, which clearly shows that the gains and losses in terms of votes and seats mainly revolve around these two national parties. This was visible in the fact that despite losing all the four seats in 2014, 2019 and recent 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Congress remained the runner-up in all these Lok Sabha seats, underlining the nature of the bipolar contest. The nature of political participation and electoral issues in Himachal Pradesh remained confined to state-specific issues and leadership during the previous Lok Sabha elections. The general elections of 2014, were contested in a visible nationwide mood for change and the BJP channeled its energy and organisational strength in a very significant and strategic manner. It was the leadership factor in the form of Modi wave that was most decisive in leading to unprecedented victory for the BJP. The weak and fragile Congress leadership at the National level as well as state level failed to impress the electorate of the state. The Congress in the state failed to take advantage of the incumbency factor that most previous ruling parties in Himachal Pradesh have benefited from in Lok Sabha elections. This highlights the fact that the state politics has emerged in new dimensions that follow the nationwide mood.

Voting Behaviour Shift the Trends

Himachal Pradesh's 89.96 percent population lived in rural areas and 10.04 percent lived in urban areas. Mostly the rural population follows the caste system and untouchability even today. Caste practices in electoral politics also have been common. Scholars like Rajni Kothari, Partha Chatterjee argued that caste is the persistent variable of the Indian polity. The majority of the state's population consists of the two upper castes, Rajput (37.5 percent) and Brahmin (18 percent), with the former being numerically stronger with a presence of around 56 percent. The only district in Himachal Pradesh to experience an OBC majority is Kangra, while some lived in the Sirmour district also. While Scheduled Castes (SC) are evenly distributed all across the Himachal, majority of Scheduled Tribes (STs) are concentrated in upper reaches (the scheduled areas of Kinnaur, Lahaul & Spiti and Chamba). With the exception of 20 reserved seats (SC 17 and ST 3), the majority of state assembly candidates are members of the dominant upper castes, specifically Brahmin and Rajput. Interestingly, in decades, even the party presidents of the Congress and BJP have either been Rajputs or Brahmins.

Rajput and Brahmin communities have been dominating Himachal Pradesh politics since the first Assembly Election in 1952. Among seven Chief Ministers of Himachal Pradesh six (Dr. Yaswant Singh Parmar, Thakur Ramlal, Virbhadr Singh, Prem Kumar Dhumal, Jairam Thakur, Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu) belongs to the

Rajput community and one (Shanta Kumar) was from to Brahmin community and SCs, STs, OBCs never became Chief Minister. After seventy years of independence, Thakur feels privileged being rulers of the society and both the parties try to encash this attitude in the political institutions also.

Caste plays an important role in ticket allocation, so political parties are also concerned about this. They mostly consider Rajput and Brahmin as their candidates for maximum seats, apart from reserved seats. Even on the selection of CM face, caste also plays a pivotal role, (Kumar, 2020). But they (political parties) never did this publicly and openly, like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other caste dominant states did. They never announce in any public platform and other mode of communication that they took ticket allocation on the basis of a particular caste but they always keep in their mind. This is all done silently, so we are using 'silent castism' for this particular system. Other side electoral patterns also highlight this system. So in general it seems like people choose their representatives in the name of development and party line.

State elections from 1990 to 2022, indicates that people of Himachal Pradesh want change in their government after every five years for their betterment. So, after every five years, they vote for change in the state assembly elections. Meanwhile, they also follow the national elections trends at the same time. Another trend which continued in the state politics till 2014 was that which party was in power in the state, took advantage in the Lok Sabha Elections, but in 2014 Lok Sabha elections and after that, due to Modi's Charismatic personality, hill people continue to show their support towards the BJP. While in the state Assembly elections they continued the trend of changing the government every five years. This can be analysed in the lens of the 'split ticket voting' (Aiyar and Sircar, 2020) phenomenon. When a voter is more inclusive about national preferences, they use a split ticket to two different parties at two different levels, such as the BJP in the national election and the Congress in the state election. Assume that the state voters would rather see Narendra Modi in the prime minister's position but in the state they want to see change.

In the electoral history of the state, not any party retained their power for the second time since 1985. Even for a long time period 1998 to 2017, BJP and Congress had the same face to lead their party campaigns. During this period, Virbhadra Singh (Six time CM) led Congress, and Prem Kumar Dhumal (two time CM) led BJP. Results never affect their face value even changes in governance. A strong anti-incumbency feeling also has always played a significant role in government rotation. This is partially owing to a big workforce of government employees who are vertically split on party lines and leverage it to extract more from governments, (Thakur, 2017). Keeping alive the state's record of changing governments every five years, Himachal Pradesh brought the Congress back to power with a handsome margin of the seats in recent Assembly elections 2022.

Shift in Political Strategies

Congress and BJP have relied heavily on their national leadership to influence state politics. The role of national leaders such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi (BJP) and former Congress president Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi has been crucial in elections. Their visits, campaigns, and promises during elections often shape the local political discourse. In Himachal Pradesh, the impact of national figures like Modi (especially his emphasis on nationalism, development, and welfare schemes) has been pivotal in recent electoral victories for the BJP.

Both Congress and BJP have made an effort to adapt their national agendas to local concerns. Historically, voters were inclined toward Congress due to its longer history of governance. However, as BJP gained popularity, particularly with promises of governance reforms and stronger nationalism, voter preferences shifted. Both parties have also adopted new political strategies to engage with the electorate. The use of technology, social media, and digital platforms by both BJP and Congress has allowed them to target younger voters and reach out to rural areas more effectively. This has marked a departure from earlier times when political campaigns were more localized and depended heavily on traditional methods like rallies, word of mouth, and local leaders.

Status of State and Local Parties

State parties in Himachal Pradesh were impacted by some internal factors. Mostly state parties came into existence because of splits in national parties Congress and BJP. These state and local parties did not have their independent and separate electoral agendas. It is clear that the majority of the attempts to form state-level parties were nothing but the attempt by erstwhile leaders to act as spoilers for their parent parties (BJP and Congress) and favoured another party. Another structural aspect that has constituted to the disappointing performance of the state parties is the timing to appear when the state assembly elections are around the corner. Most of these state parties were initiated only by one or two leaders. The electoral statistics of the assembly elections reveals that no party except HVC and HLP had contested their candidates even on at least half of the state assembly seats. Most of the parties were formed by one or by only a small group of leaders, and were formed exactly before the state elections. These two patterns in the origin of state level parties restrain these parties to create a cadre in the state. Apart from these factors another factor which is notable is the unstable nature of these state level parties, (Palnata, 2020). This instability and uncertainty about the commitment of these person-centric small parties formed by the political entrepreneurs made it difficult to build the trust among the people for these parties.

Conclusion

With the passage of time in Himachal Pradesh, the role of national parties such as Congress and BJP has undergone significant changes while retaining elements of continuity. The Congress was dominant for much of the state's early history, but in recent decades, the BJP has emerged as a strong contender, marking a shift in political power. The national parties have adapted to the local dynamics, yet continue to wield significant influence in shaping the state's political landscape. However, issues related to development, and governance continue to play a crucial role in the electoral outcomes, making Himachal Pradesh a microcosm of broader national political trends, with specific regional adaptations.

The social bases of both the Congress and the BJP are comparatively stable, and it is only a small variation in those bases that causes the parties fortunes to alternate. In this conventional two-party system, little swings can tip the scales in either way. This means that, in addition to performance, elements such as leader popularity, successful campaigning, and reducing factionalism are critical to election results. Thus, the state's parliamentary elections were determined by national politics. Shift in voting behaviour also reflects that people give importance to the issues like development in the state. That is why they change the state government every five years to get the maximum development benefits. Himachal Pradesh has thus become the most stable state, which has sped up the advancement of the state's modernization and political development. The political system is becoming increasingly successful in delivering the 'goods' as a result of the stability.

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