

Political Parties and Reforms

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1.INTRODUCTION

Political parties are indispensable to the functioning of a modern democracy. They organize public opinion, contest Elections from governments, and ensure Political accountability. In India, which is the world's largest democracy, political parties have played a significant role in political parties have played a significant role in the freedom struggle, nation-building, and democratic consolidation. However, despite their centrality, Indian political parties have increasingly been criticized for deviating from democratic norms and ethical practices. The growing influence of money and muscle power, criminalization of politics, erosion of ideological commitments, and lack of internal democracy have weakened public confidence in political institution. Consequently, the need for comprehensive political and electoral reforms has become a major concern for scholars, policymakers, civil society, and the judiciary. This paper seeks to examine the nature and role of political parties in India identify the key challenges they face, analyze the reform initiatives undertaken so far, and suggest measures to strengthen the party system in India.

2. POLITICAL PARTIES AND REFORMS

Political parties are the backbone of a democratic system, they act as a vital link between the government and the citizen by aggregating public opinion, contesting elections forming governments, and ensuring political accountability. Representing social, economic, regional, and ideological interests. However, over time, political parties have also faced criticism for corruption, lack of internal democracy criminalization of politics, and declining public trust, these challenges have generated a strong demand for political and electoral reforms aimed at strengthening democracy institutions. Political reforms related to parties are essential to ensure transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and effective governance. This paper examines the role of political parties in a democracy, the major issues affecting them, and the need for reforms with special reference to India

3. MEANING AND ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

A political party is an organized group of people who share common principles and objectives and seek to attain political power through constitutional means, mainly by contesting elections. Political parties perform several key functions in a democracy.

1. Representation of public Opinion – political parties articulate and aggregate the interests of different sections of society.
2. Candidate selection – parties nominate candidates for elections and provide voters with clear choices.
3. Policy Formulation – parties develop policies and programs that guide governance.
4. Formation of government – The party or coalition with majority support forms the government.
5. Political education – parties educate citizens on political issues and democratic values.
6. Accountability – Opposition parties keep the ruling government under check.

Without political party's democracy would be fragmented, unstable, and ineffective.

MAJOR ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY POLITICAL PARTIES

Despite their importance, political parties in India face several serious problems:

1.Lack of Internal Democracy

Most political parties lack transparent and democratic internal structures.

Leadership positions are often controlled by a few individuals, and regular organization elections are rare. This weakens participation and accountability within parties.

2. Dynastic Politics

Family dominance in political parties has become a common feature. Leadership is frequently passed on to family members, reducing opportunities for grassroots leaders and undermining merit-based politics.

3.Criminalization of Politics

Many political leaders face criminal charges, including serious offenses.

The nexus between crime, money, and politics erodes public trust and threatens democratic

Values

4. Role of Money Power

Election campaigns require huge financial resources, leading to dependence on wealthy donors and corporate interest. This encourages corruption and creates unequal political

Competition.

5. Communalism and Caste Politics

Some parties mobilize supporters based on religion, caste, or identity which can deepen social divisions and weaken national unity.

6. Weak Ideological Commitment

Many parties lack a clear ideology and frequently shift alliances for political gain, leading to instability and voter disillusionment.

Political party reforms aim to increase transparency, accountability, and internal democracy, focusing on measures like regulating internal affairs, mandating women's quotas (e.g., 1/3rd tickets), introducing state election funding to reduce corruption, strengthening anti-defection laws, ensuring candidate disclosures (criminal, assets), and enhancing citizen participation to hold parties accountable for better governance.

Key Areas for Reform

Internal Democracy & Governance: Laws to regulate internal party affairs, requiring member registers and adherence to party constitutions. Promoting internal democracy and accountability, involving youth, women, and other groups in decision-making.

Gender Representation: Mandating minimum tickets (e.g., 1/3rd) for women candidates. Establishing quotas for women in party decision-making bodies. **Electoral Finance & Corruption:** State funding for elections (in cash or kind like petrol, paper) to reduce reliance on big donors. Mandatory disclosure of criminal records, assets, and liabilities by candidates. Regulating donations (e.g., accepting over ₹20,000 only with details).

Accountability & Transparency: Strengthening anti-defection laws (like India's 1985 law) to curb frequent party switching. Compulsory voting to ensure broader participation and accountability. Banning the use of caste and religion data during elections. **Citizen & Media Role:** Encouraging active citizen participation, media involvement, and pressure groups to push for reforms.

Examples of Reforms (India) Anti-Defection Law (1985): Prevented MPs/MLAs from changing parties after election. Candidate Disclosure Rules (1997-2009): Candidates must declare criminal cases, assets, education. EVMs & Voting: Braille features on EVMs; proxy voting for armed forces. Media: EC ensures equal media time for recognized parties. Broader Goals
Strengthening Democracy: Reforms aim to improve representative democracy, citizen representation, and overall political system effectiveness. Focus on Issues: Encouraging parties to focus on national/international issues for public good, rather than just conflict.

Reforming political parties in India requires enhancing internal democracy, accountability, and transparency to ensure fair representation and ethical functioning. Key measures include strengthening internal democracy, regulating candidate selection, ensuring financial transparency, increasing women's representation, and implementing stringent anti-defection laws.

Here are five specific ways to reform political parties in India:

1. Regulate Internal Affairs and Democratic Functioning: Implement laws requiring political parties to hold regular, free, and fair internal elections for office bearers to end dynastic politics and promote inner-party democracy.

2. Mandatory Reservation for Women: Make it mandatory for all political parties to reserve at least one-third (33%) of their tickets for women candidates in both Parliamentary and State Assembly elections.

3. Transparency in Funding and State Funding: Introduce state funding of elections in kind (e.g., fuel, paper, media time) to reduce the influence of black money, alongside mandatory auditing and publishing of donation sources.

4. Enforce Mandatory Membership Registers: Require parties to maintain a legally audited register of members to ensure accountability and transparency in their organizational structure.

5. Strict Anti-Defection and Candidate Selection Laws: Tighten the Anti-Defection Law to prevent "Ayaram-Gayaram" (shifting parties) politics and mandate the disqualification of candidates with serious pending criminal charges.

6. Political parties can be reformed to enhance democratic functioning, reduce corruption, and ensure better representation. Key reforms include regulating internal affairs, implementing gender quotas, ensuring transparent funding, promoting internal democracy, and encouraging citizen participation.

Here are five specific ways to reform political parties:

1. Regulate Internal Affairs: Implement laws forcing parties to maintain a register of members, hold regular organizational elections, and follow their own constitutions to prevent dictatorship by a few leaders.

2. Mandatory Gender Quotas: Make it mandatory for parties to reserve a minimum number of tickets (e.g., at least one-third) for women candidates, ensuring better representation in decision-making bodies.

3. State Funding of Elections: Introduce state funding to curb the influence of money power, providing parties with resources (cash or in-kind, like fuel/paper) for campaigns to create a level playing field.

4. Transparent Auditing: Require parties to maintain audited accounts and submit them to the Election Commission to ensure transparency in donations and expenditures, reducing corruption.

5. Encourage Active Participation: Promote the participation of ordinary citizens and deserving, honest individuals, rather than just professional politicians, in candidate selection.

Way to Reform Political Parties

Following are some of the recent efforts and suggestions in our country to reform political parties and its leaders:

ANTI-DEFECTION LAW:

This law was passed during Rajiv Gandhi's Premiership. The law says that if any MLA or MP changes parties, he or she will lose the seat in the legislature. This new law has helped bring defection down. At the same time this has made any dissent even more difficult. MPs and MLAs have to accept whatever the party leaders decide.

DETAILS OF PROPERTY AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS DURING NOMINATION:

It is mandatory for every candidate who contests elections to file an AFFIDAVIT giving details of his property and criminal cases pending against him. The new system has made a lot of information available to the public. But there is no system of check if the information given by the candidates is true.

MANDATORY ORGANIZATIONAL ELECTIONS AND IT RETURNS:

The Election Commission passed an order making it necessary for political parties to hold their organisational elections and file their income tax returns. The parties have started doing so but sometimes it is mere formality.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE:

1. A law should be made to regulate the internal affairs of political parties. It should be made mandatory for political parties to give a minimum number of tickets, about one-third, to women candidates.
2. There should be state funding of elections. The government should give parties money to support their election expenses. This support could be given in kind: petrol, paper, telephone etc. Or it could be given in cash on the basis of the votes secured by the party in the last election.
3. These suggestions have not yet been accepted by political parties. If and when these are accepted these could lead to some improvement. But we must be very careful about legal solutions to political problems. Over-regulation of political parties can be counterproductive. This would force all parties to find ways to cheat the law.

There are two other ways in which political parties can be reformed:

1. People's Pressure: As per an old Hindi saying a public gets the leadership it deserves. Most of the people in India have indifferent attitude towards happenings around them. Once public becomes aware and starts asserting its thoughts it will be easier to reform the political landscape of India.
2. People's Participation: If nice people will continue shunning politics then we will continue to get leaders with criminal backgrounds. Off late eminent personalities from other fields have started joining politics. This is good sign for the future of Indian politics.

Reforming political parties means changing their structures, rules, and practices to improve democracy, transparency, and accountability, addressing issues like internal democracy, corruption, and unequal representation, often through internal rules (member lists, leadership elections) or external laws (women's quotas, state funding for elections) to make them more ethical and representative of the public good.

Key Aspects of Political Party Reform:

1. Internal Democracy: Mandating parties to follow their own constitutions, maintain member registers, and hold open elections for top posts to prevent autocratic control.
2. Transparency & Accountability: Requiring parties to publicly account for funds and making processes clearer to reduce corruption and reliance on "money and muscle power".
3. Increased Representation: Implementing quotas, such as requiring a minimum number of women candidates or positions, to ensure diverse voices are heard.

Funding Reforms: Introducing state funding for elections (in cash or kind like petrol, paper) to lessen dependence on private donors and level the playing field.

Ethical Governance: Reducing corruption, increasing participation from educated citizens, and preventing criminals or self-seekers from dominating.

Why Reform is Needed:

Strengthen Democracy: To make parties more responsive to citizens and less influenced by illicit means, strengthening the democratic process overall.

Combat Corruption: To tackle systemic corruption within parties, not just individual leaders.

Address Public Trust Deficit: To bring back educated and professional classes who are currently disengaged from politics, filling a leadership vacuum. In essence, it's about transforming political parties from opaque, potentially self-serving entities into transparent, democratic organizations that genuinely serve the public interest.

Meaning of party reforms: Improving internal working of parties to make them more democratic, transparent and accountable.

Legal-Constitutional Reforms: Anti-Defection Law (52nd Amendment, 1985; strengthened 91st, 2003):

Disqualification for switching parties after election Limits size of Council of Ministers
Mandatory Affidavits by candidates (SC orders):

Disclosure of criminal cases, assets, liabilities, education

RTI and transparency moves (partly):

Parties required to submit audited accounts, income-tax returns Election Commission regulations:

Model Code of Conduct, expenditure limits, monitoring of campaigns Reservation & representation in local bodies: Encouraging inclusion of women and weaker sections in politics

Internal Party Reforms (organizational):

(i) Internal democracy: Regular organizational elections Decentralized decision-making

(ii) Transparency in funding:

Clean sources, audited accounts, donor disclosure (e.g. above threshold)

(iii) Candidate selection: Merit-based, clean image, wider consultation at grassroots

(iv) Code of conduct within parties: Against hate speech, money/muscle power

(v) Inclusion: More youth, women, SC/ST, OBC, minorities in party posts & tickets

Electoral-Financial Reforms (process side):

State funding/partial support: Free media time, subsidized venues, caps on expenses

Strict enforcement on black money: Real-time reporting of donations and spends

Use of technology. Online donations, digital accounting, e-filing, cVIGIL type complaint apps

Strengthening ECI powers: Faster action on violations, stricter penalties Judicial & Citizens' Initiatives: Fast-track courts for cases against candidates Voter awareness (SVEEP), RTI activism

NGOs tracking criminality and finances Recent trends/examples (general): Affidavit disclosures becoming standard Greater media scrutiny of funding and manifestos Discussions on inner-party democracy and women's reservation in tickets

Challenges still remaining: Personality cults, lack of inner-party elections Use of money and muscle power Opaque funding channels Criminalization of politics.

Major Political and Electoral Reforms in India

1. Anti-Defection Law

The Tenth Schedule of the Indian Constitution was introduced to curb political defections it disqualifies legislators who switch parties' after elections, helping to maintain political stability.

2. Role of the election Commission of India

The Election Commission regulates political parties, conducts free and fair elections, enforces the Model Code of conduct, and monitors elections expenditure.

3. Electoral Finance Reforms

Measures such as expenditure limits, disclosure of donation, and digital transaction have been introduced to improve transparency. However, challenges remain regarding anonymous funding.

4. NOTA (None of the above)

The introduction of NOTA gives voters the option to reject all candidates, strengthening voter choice and democratic expression.

5. Disqualification of criminal Candidates

The Supreme Court has directed political parties to disclose criminal records of candidates, increasing voter awareness.

Role of Citizens and Civil Society

Political reforms cannot succeed without active citizen participation. Civil society organizations, media, judiciary and voters play a critical role in demanding accountability and transparency from political parties. Ethical voting, public debate, and peaceful activism strengthen democratic values

Evolution of Political Parties in India

India has a multi-party system due to its social, cultural, linguistic, and regional diversity. The Indian National Congress dominated the political scene in the early decade's after independence. However, since the late 1960s, regional and national parties have emerged strongly, leading to coalition politics

Major national parties include the Indian National Congress (INC) and Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP), while regional parties such as The DMK, TMC, BJD, SP, and others play a crucial role in state and national politics. This pluralism has strengthened representation but has also introduced new challenging in governance and political stability

Conclusion:

Reforms are focusing on transparency, inner democracy, clean funding, and fair elections. Effective implementation and citizen vigilance are making parties more accountable.

Political parties are collective entities and activities that organize competitions for political offices.[1]:3 The members of a political party contest elections under a shared label. In a narrow definition, a political party can be thought of as just the group of candidates who run for office under a party label.[2]:3 In a broader definition, political parties are the entire apparatus that supports the election of a group of candidates, including voters and volunteers

who identify with a particular political party, the official party organizations that support the election of that party's candidates, and legislators in the government who are affiliated with the party.[3] In many countries, the notion of a political party is defined in law, and governments may specify requirements for an organization to legally qualify as a political party.[4]

Political parties are distinguished from other political groups or clubs, such as parliamentary groups, because only presidents have control over the political foundations of the party and also they include political factions, or advocacy groups, mostly by the fact that a party is focused on electing candidates, whereas a parliamentary group is a group of political parties, a political faction is a subgroup within a political party, and an advocacy group is focused on advancing a policy agenda.[5] This is related to other features that sometimes distinguish parties from other political organizations, including a larger membership, greater stability over time, and a deeper connection to the electorate.[6]

In addition to contesting elections, political parties serve key functions such as articulating a shared set of beliefs and a policy platform (ideology) to address public issues, recruiting and training potential political leaders, and acting as a vital link between the government and the populace.

Reference Books

1. Indian Constitution
2. NCERT-Political Science Textbooks
3. Election Commission of India Reports
4. Subhash Kashyap- Oure Political System
5. M.Laxmikanth-Indian polity.