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Q3

"The Indian party system is passing through a phase of transition which looks to be full of contradictions and paradoxes." Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · GS II · 12 marks · Governance and Policy

Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

Core demand of the question

- "The Indian party system is passing through a phase of transition which looks to be full of contradictions and paradoxes." Discuss
- Map the shift from Congress dominance to coalitions and a new national pole, and show the legal and organisational paradoxes that sit inside that shift

Revision summary

The party system moved from Congress dominance to coalitions and then to a new national majority, without erasing State-level regional parties.

Presidential campaign style collides with parliamentary collective responsibility.

The Tenth and 91st Amendments curb defection and cabinet size but strengthen high commands.

National and state party labels under the Symbols Order do not match the mixed federal reality.

The transition is therefore full of legal and political paradoxes, not a clean model change.

Introduction

India's party system has moved from one-party Congress dominance after 1952, through a long coalition age after 1989, to a new national pole after 2014, while regional parties, the **Tenth Schedule**, and internal party autocracy all remain. The transition is real; so are the contradictions, because parliamentary rules, federal society, and presidential-style campaigns do not move in one line.

Body**The transition**

- The first two decades after the Constitution were a Congress system in Rajni Kothari's sense: a dominant party with factions, not a rigid two-party model.
- 1967, 1977 and 1989 broke that monopoly; hung Houses, National Front and United Front experiments, and then NDA and UPA coalitions made coalition federalism the working form of **Article 75** government.
- 2014 and 2019 produced a single-party majority in the Lok Sabha again, yet regional parties still decide many State Assemblies and several Rajya Sabha arithmetic problems, so the system is not a simple return to 1952.

- The **Election Commission's** recognition rules under the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968, and the **Representation of the People Act, 1951**, still sort "national" and "state" parties by vote and seat tests that lag behind political reality.

Contradictions and paradoxes

- Parliamentary government needs collective responsibility and a working majority; campaigns have become leader-centred and presidential in style, which sits oddly with **Articles 75 and 164**.
- The **Tenth Schedule**, added by the 52nd Amendment, 1985, and tightened by the 91st Amendment, 2003, punishes defection but also freezes dissent inside the legislature, so party bosses gain while inner-party democracy stays weak.
- Anti-defection does not regulate the high command's power to issue a whip on every ordinary vote, which turns MPs into numbers rather than representatives, even as voters are told they chose a person.
- Regional parties demand federal autonomy in the States and then bargain for Union ministries in Delhi; they are both defenders of State rights and players in central coalition rent.
- A national party can dominate the Lok Sabha and still lose a string of States, which is a federal paradox, not a failure of the **Election Commission**.
- Social cleavage parties (caste, region, language) coexist with a catch-all national appeal on development and security; the same voter may split a Lok Sabha choice from an Assembly choice.
- The 91st Amendment capped Council of Ministers at 15 per cent of the House, which cut oversized coalition cabinets, but it did not end the use of extra-constitutional posts, parliamentary secretaries, or outside props to reward allies.
- Inner-party elections under the **Election Commission's** guidelines and under **Section 29A** registration are often formal; dynastic succession in several parties contradicts the language of political equality in the Preamble.

What the paradoxes mean

- The system is transitional because no stable two-party Westminster pattern has arrived, and because federal society keeps producing State-level systems that do not mirror the national result.
- Law can police symbols, splits and minister numbers; it cannot by itself create programmatic parties. That gap is the deepest paradox of the Indian party system.

Flow diagram

Congress dominance -> Coalition age after 1989
 Coalition age after 1989 -> New national pole after 2014
 New national pole after 2014 -> Regional parties in States
 Tenth Schedule -> Whip over dissent
 Regional parties in States -> Federal paradox
 Whip over dissent -> Federal paradox

Conclusion

India is leaving a long coalition interval without becoming a classic two-party system. Majority at the Centre, regional strength in the States, anti-defection without inner democracy, and presidential campaigns inside a parliamentary Constitution are the live contradictions. The transition will look paradoxical until parties themselves become more internally democratic and more programmatically federal.

Facts & figures

Tenth Schedule

Anti-defection provisions inserted by the Constitution (52nd Amendment) Act, 1985, disqualifying members who defy the party whip or voluntarily give up membership.

Constitution (91st Amendment) Act, 2003

Capped the Council of Ministers at 15 per cent of the House (12 per cent in smaller States) and tightened defection exceptions for splits.

Representation of the People Act, 1951

Governs party registration, election conduct, and corrupt practices that structure competition among parties.

Election Symbols Order, 1968

Election Commission order that recognises national and state parties and allots reserved symbols.

Section 29A, RP Act, 1951

Provides for registration of political parties with the **Election Commission**, a legal door that does not by itself ensure inner-party democracy.

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