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Q7(a)

"The Indian party system is shaped by a complex interaction of the country's federal structure, electoral system and social cleavages." Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Party System

Party System: National and regional political parties, ideological and social bases of parties; patterns of coalition politics; Pressure groups, trends in electoral behaviour; changing socio-economic profile of Legislators.

Core demand of the question

- "The Indian party system is shaped by a complex interaction of the country's federal structure, electoral system and social cleavages." Explain. (20 marks)

Revision summary

The Indian party system is not a simple two-party copy of Westminster.

Federalism allows state parties and two-level careers.

First-past-the-post rewards territorially concentrated cleavage groups.

Caste, language, religion, and region, as in **Kothari** and **Jaffrelot**, are the social raw material.

Mandal and coalition federalism after **1989** made the three-way interaction unmistakable.

Introduction

Indian parties are not copies of a British two-party model. **Rajni Kothari**'s Congress system, the **Rudolphs**' modernity of tradition, and **Christophe Jaffrelot**'s caste-class politics all show a system made by federal bargains, first-past-the-post rules, and social splits that the ballot organises rather than erases.

Body

Federal structure

- A Union of states with their own Assemblies creates a two-level career for parties. A party may be a dwarf in Delhi and a giant in a state.
- State parties use **Article 356** memories, language, and regional dignity as organisation, not only as ideology.
- Coalition federalism after the Congress system's decline made the Rajya Sabha, GST-era bargaining, and state bosses central to national government.
- **Federalism thus multiplies party systems:** one national competitive field and many state systems, linked by alliances.

Electoral system

- Single-member first-past-the-post in Lok Sabha and Assemblies rewards geographically concentrated support and punishes evenly spread minorities of votes.

- **Duverger's tendency toward two parties is blocked in India by regional concentration:** many parties survive as state majorities.
- The same rule inflates seat shares of front-runners and encourages pre-poll coalitions rather than pure proportional representation.
- Presidential-style campaigns for a Prime Minister still run through this local-seat machine, so charisma must be translated into constituencies.

Social cleavages

- Caste, religion, language, and region are the main cleavages. **Kothari** showed Congress absorbing them; **Jaffrelot** showed OBCs and Dalits later building their own parties after **Mandal**.
- The **Rudolphs** argued that caste associations modernise as vote banks and demand groups, a political, not only ascriptive, fact.
- Class exists, as **Marx** would insist, but it is cross-cut by caste and region, so a single labour party did not dominate.
- Cleavages are not static. Mandal, Mandir, and economic reform after 1991 recoded them.

Interaction, the point of the quote

- **Federalism gives cleavage a territorial home:** a linguistic or caste majority in one state becomes a ruling party there.
- FPTP then converts that territorial cleavage into seats, which become coalition chips at the Centre.
- A purely ideological left-right system would look different under PR in a unitary state. India got neither.
- **Easton's** allocation of values happens through this three-factor filter: who sits in which House, from which social bloc, under which electoral math.

After the Congress system

- **1989** onward, hung Parliaments and coalitions made the interaction visible: state parties as national veto players.
- A later national bipolarity still rests on state allies and on cleavage management, not on the death of region.
- **Explanation:** the party system is the product of these three, not of a constitutionally named "party clause".

Flow diagram

Federal structure -> Party system
 FPTP electoral system -> Party system
 Social cleavages -> Party system
 Kothari Jaffrelot Rudolphs -> Party system

Conclusion

Federal structure territorialises parties, first-past-the-post turns concentrated social blocs into seats, and cleavages of caste, language, and religion supply the blocs. **Kothari**, the **Rudolphs**, and **Jaffrelot** describe the resulting system. The interaction is the explanation; no single factor is enough.

Facts & figures

Kothari

The Congress system: a dominant party that internalised competition across India's social map.

Jaffrelot

Analysed OBC and Dalit politicisation, especially around Mandal.

Rudolphs

The Modernity of Tradition: caste as a political association in democratic India.

1989

End of Congress majority at the Centre; coalition and federalised party bargaining become normal.

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