The Transition of Party System in India: From Polarized Pluralism to Moderate Pluralism

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1. Introduction

India has been a parliamentary democracy since independence in 1947. From 1951 onward, India has conducted a total of 14 general elections for the Lok Sabha (the Lower House). It has also conducted regular general elections for the State Legislative Assembly in each state. In India’s political environment, political parties are considered as important political entities. India is known as the world’s largest democracy which makes it a good testing ground for party politics.

The history of party politics in India offers many examples for the study of party system. A party system is defined as “the relationships among the political parties in a country (that is, in a political system)”. A party system involves the number of parties, the balance of power among parties, the ideological and policy positions of each party, and so on [Tanaka 2000: 199]. The research works on party systems in India until the 1960s had an important influence on the typology or the comparative analysis of party systems. The current party system in India makes a good case for the study of multi-party systems. In this article, I focus on the party system in India since the late 1980s.

One of the most famous research works on party politics today has been done by Giovanni Sartori [Sartori 1976]. Although his models of party systems were published about 30 years ago, they are still considered to be the most comprehensive and reliable in...
explaining the party system in each country. As I will describe later, Indian party politics since the late 1980s shows signs of fragmentation and regionalization. Such a party system in India can be explained by using Sartori's widely known models of “moderate pluralism” and “polarized pluralism”.

According to Sartori’s models, if a polity has a large number of parties and shows a tendency of high fragmentation of political parties, ideological differences among political parties tend to be large, and the party system tends to become polarized pluralism. However, the case of India shows that the Indian party system changed from polarized pluralism to moderate pluralism even in the context of high fragmentation of political parties. Although the purpose of this article is not to refute Sartori's thesis, I would like to show that the case of Indian party system gives good examples which are helpful for complementing and elaborating his models.

This article is divided into six sections. In Sections 2 and 3, I review the chief characteristics of the Indian party system since independence.1 In Section 3, I also argue that the structure of the contemporary Indian party system shows signs of fragmentation and regionalization. In Section 4, I describe the typology and the models of party system as developed by Sartori, especially the models of “polarized pluralism” and “moderate pluralism”. In Section 5, I analyze the Indian party system since the late 1980s using Sartori’s models. In Section 6, I conclude my arguments and indicate the tasks for subsequent research.

2. From the “Congress System” to the “Congress-Opposition System”

2.1 The Congress System: From 1947 to the 1960s

In this section, I will review the existing literatures on the Indian party system from 1947 to the late 1980s. From independence in 1947 to the middle of the 1960s, party politics in India revolved around the Indian National Congress (the Congress Party). In three Lok Sabha elections until 1962, the Congress Party won about 45% of the votes and about 75% of the seats (See Figure 1a and 1b). During that period, there were some opposition parties such as the Communist Party of India [CPI], Socialist Party, Praja Socialist Party [PSP], Bharatiya Jan Sangh [BJS], Swatantra Party, and so on. However, the power-base of these opposition parties was much less than that of the Congress Party.

The Indian party system of the period from 1947 to the middle of the 1960s has been described by two researchers, Rajni Kothari and W. H. Morris-Jones. Kothari described the Indian party system of this period as the “Congress System” or as “a system of one party dominance” [Kothari 1964; Kothari 1973]. Around the same time as Kothari had developed his model, Morris-Jones also developed the same kind of model. He characterized the Indian party system until the 1960s as “dominance coexisting with competition but without trace of alternation”, and argued that competitive politics without shift in power
was “perfectly possible” [Morris-Jones 1978: 217].

Their models of the Indian party system were a timely critique of the existing typology of party systems, particularly in relation to the research work done by Maurice Duverger [Duverger 1963 (1954); Kothari 1964: 1161; Morris-Jones 1978: 216]. Their main arguments were that it was possible to make competitive politics work even in a one party dominant

![Figure 1a Vote Shares of the Congress Party and the BJP in the Lok Sabha Elections](chart1a)

![Figure 1b Seat Shares of the Congress Party and the BJP in the Lok Sabha Elections](chart1b)

Source: Compiled from the election reports published by the Election Commission of India.

Note: Election reports are available in PDF format in the website of the Election Commission of India (http://www.eci.gov.in/). PDF files of the reports from this website were accessed on February 6, 2006.
party system. Their models are still considered to be the most reliable in explaining the party system in India from independence to the middle of the 1960s.

The models developed by Kothari and Morris-Jones also affected the subsequent research works on the typology of party systems. For example, in 1976, Giovanni Sartori put forward the model of “predominant party system”, and categorized the Indian party system until the 1960s in terms of this model [Sartori 1976: 192-201]. This party system, according to Sartori, is “such to the extent that, and as long as, its major party is consistently supported by a winning majority (the absolute majority of seats) of the voters” [Sartori 1976: 196]. A predominant party system is one of the competitive systems. In this party system, “parties other than the major one not only are permitted to exist, but do exist as legal and legitimate — if not necessarily effective — competitors of the predominant party” [Sartori 1976: 195]. However, because the same party keeps winning in the elections over the long term, changes of the government do not occur.²

2.2 The Congress–Opposition System: The 1970s and the 1980s

In the fourth Lok Sabha election held in 1967, the power of the Congress Party was weakened. The vote share of the Congress Party fell from 44.7% in 1962 to 40.8%. The decrease in the share of seats was much worse. It fell from 73.1% in 1962 to 54.4% (See Figure 1a and 1b). The result of this election triggered an intra-party conflict between Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister at that time, and the party elders called the “syndicate”. This intra-party conflict finally resulted in the split of the Congress Party in 1969. After the split, the Indira faction was recognized by the Election Commission of India as the “Indian National Congress”. Although this new “Indian National Congress” was still in power, it was forced to become a minority.

In 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dissolved the Lok Sabha one year before the end of the term. The Congress Party won the subsequent Lok Sabha election, and gained a majority in the parliament. It also made a clean sweep in the 1972 Legislative Assembly elections in 16 states. However, due to the split in 1969, the organization of the Congress Party changed significantly. All political power was now in Indira Gandhi’s own hands (See Hirose [1994b]). In the Lok Sabha elections, voting behavior of the electorate tended to be influenced by a single national issue, and the electoral politics was described as “plebiscitary politics” [Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 127-158].

On the other hand, the opposition parties were planning to cooperate with each other against the Congress Party. In the Lok Sabha election held in 1971, though defeated, major opposition parties formed the “Grand Alliance” to fight the Congress Party. Since the 1971 Lok Sabha election, Indira Gandhi strengthened her authoritarian political powers, which resulted in the declaration of the state of emergency in 1975. Under the state of emergency, many opposition leaders were arrested and jailed. However, in the 1977 Lok Sabha election which was held just after the end of the state of emergency, major opposition parties came together and formed the “Janata Party”. The Janata Party won a landslide
victory in this election, which resulted in the first party change in the central government since independence.

Yogendra Yadav, who is well-known in the field of election studies, called the Indian party system in the 1970s and the 1980s the “Congress-Opposition system”. According to Yadav, the Indian party system “was still characterized by one-party salience though no longer dominance”. However, the “beginning of the plebiscitary mode of electoral politics saw the emergence of genuine competition to the Congress, both at the state and at the national level, often aided by electoral waves” [Yadav 1996: 99]. As Yadav points out, the basic mechanism of the Indian party system in the 1970s and the 1980s was created by the rivalry between the Congress Party and the opposition parties. In the 1970s, the opposition parties provided a real alternative to the Congress Party. In view of this, as Norio Kondo points out, it can be said that the 1970s was the most important turning point in the political history of India [Kondo 2003: 88].

3. Fragmentation and Regionalization of the Indian Party System

3.1 Party Politics in the 1980s

Because of the “plebiscitary politics”, the power of each party changed significantly every time the Lok Sabha election was held during the period marked by the “Congress-Opposition system”. During this period, however, the cooperative relationships among the opposition parties were not stable.

The Janata Party government which was formed in 1977 fell in 1979 because of intense intra-party conflict. The split in the Janata Party in 1979 led to the formation of a new party called the Janata Party (S) (“S” stands for “secular”). Furthermore, after the defeat in the Lok Sabha election in 1980, the Janata Party split again and the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] was formed. In the meantime, the Janata Party (S) was renamed as “Lok Dal” in 1979, which also split into two factions in 1987: the Lok Dal (A) led by Ajit Singh, and the Lok Dal (B) led by H. N. Bahuguna. In the first half of the 1980s, even though the opposition parties were regaining lost ground at the local state level politics, they were not so active at the central level politics.

On the other hand, the Congress Party won the 1980 Lok Sabha election and returned to power. However, it was defeated in the State Legislative Assembly elections held in 1982 and 1983. According to some analysts, the reasons for the defeat of the Congress Party in these elections were the erosion of the party organization and the furious faction fighting at the local state level [Ochiai 1993: 60]. In the eighth Lok Sabha election in 1984, the Congress Party won decisively and retained power in the central government. However, this victory was due to the success of the election campaign after the assassination of Indira Gandhi [Brass 1986: 659-665].

The activities of the opposition parties intensified again in 1987. In October 1987, V. P. Singh, who had served as a cabinet minister in the Congress Party government,
criticized the Congress Party and formed the “Jan Morcha (People’s Front)”. In 1988, The Janata Party, the Lok Dal (A), the Lok Dal (B), and the Jan Morcha merged and formed the Janata Dal [JD]. In the ninth Lok Sabha Election held in 1989, the JD formed a party coalition called the “National Front” with some regional parties. The National Front campaigned in this election with the cooperation of the Left parties and the BJP.

3.2 Fragmentation and Regionalization

In the 1989 Lok Sabha election, the vote share or the number of seats of each party changed significantly. The vote share of the Congress Party fell from 48.1% in 1984 to 39.5%. Also, the seat share fell drastically from 76.5% in 1984 to 37.2%. In the aftermath of this election, the Congress Party fell from power. The Congress Party regained its power to some degree in the 1991 Lok Sabha election. However, since the 1996 Lok Sabha election, the seat share of the Congress Party hovered at a low level of 25% (See Figure 1a and 1b). On the other hand, the JD captured 27.0% of the seats in the 1989 Lok Sabha election. After this election, the National Front led by the JD established the central government. The Left parties and the BJP supported the government from outside the coalition.

One of the most notable features of this election was that not only did the Congress Party suffer a crushing defeat, but the BJP drastically increased its seat share. The BJP captured only 0.4% of the seats (2 seats) in the 1984 Lok Sabha election just after its formation. However, the BJP swiftly expanded its influence and won 16.1% of the seats (85 seats) in the 1989 Lok Sabha election (See Figure 1b). The BJP confirmed to expand its influence throughout the 1990s (See Figure 1a and 1b), and successfully formed the central government in 1998.

In the 1989 Lok Sabha election, we can also find an increase in the number of parties which seem to have some kind of influence at the national level politics, and the “fragmentation” of the party system. Figure 2 shows the scores of “Effective Number of...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Votes (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indian National Congress</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samajwadi Party [SP]</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD]</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP]</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [DMK]</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shivsena [SHS]</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biju Janata Dal [BJD]</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of India [CPI]</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist Congress Party [NCP]</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
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<td>Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)]</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiromani Akali Dal [SAD]</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattali Makkal Katchi [PMK]</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand Mukti Morcha [JMM]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telangana Rashtra Samithi [TRS]</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telugu Desam [TDP]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lok Jan Shakti Party [LJNSP]</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [MDMK]</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Forward Bloc [AIFB]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashtriya Lok Dal [RLD]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Trinamool Congress [AITC]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asom Gana Parishad [AGP]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir National Conference [JKN]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (12 parties)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 543

Source: See Figure 1a and 1b.
The Transition of Party System in India

Parties [ENP]" based on vote shares and seat shares of parties in 14 Lok Sabha elections held until 2004. ENP is an index based on "number of parties" and "relative strength of each party", and indicates the degree of fragmentation of the party system. The higher the degree of fragmentation of a party system, the higher the score of ENP. As we can see in Figure 2, the scores of ENP based on seat shares increased from 1.69 in 1984 to 4.11 in 1989. ENP based on vote shares also increased from 3.84 in 1984 to 4.74 in 1989. This means that fragmentation of the party system in India progressed significantly in the late 1980s.

As shown in Figure 2, since the 1996 Lok Sabha election, the scores of ENP based on seat shares remain around 7. Moreover, the number of parties which won at least one seat in the Lok Sabha elections also increased significantly. In the Lok Sabha elections held in 1989 and 1991, 24 parties won at least one seat. In 1996, the number of such parties increased to 28. Since the 1998 Lok Sabha election, it has reached almost 40 (39 in 1998, 38 in 1999 and 2004). Table 1 shows the results of the 2004 Lok Sabha election. Among the 38 parties which won at least one seat in this election, only the Congress Party and the BJP were able to win more than 100 seats. However, these two parties were able to capture only about 25% of the seats. It is impossible for the Congress Party or the BJP to get a majority in the parliament on its own. In view of these facts, we can say that the "fragmentation of the party system" is one of the characteristics of the current party politics in India. Currently, the party system in India consists of two main parties, the Congress Party and the BJP, and many small parties.

Fragmentation of the party system in India has a lot to do with "regionalization" of the support base of each party. Currently, the support bases of most parties, except the Congress Party and the BJP, tend to concentrate in a specific state or a region. Only the Congress Party and the BJP have geographically widespread support bases compared to other smaller parties. In the current political situation of India, only these two parties deserve to be called "national parties". As a result of the regionalization of the support base of each party, a different kind of party systems is developing in each state. This phenomenon can be called the "regionalization of the party system". Table 2 shows the results of the latest Legislative Assembly elections in all of the states and two Union Territories (Delhi and Pondicherry). In most of the states the Congress Party or the BJP is ranked as the main party. However, a lot of states also have their own "state parties", and these state parties compete actively with the Congress Party or the BJP. Moreover, as shown by the scores of ENP, the number of influential parties varies from state to state.

Fragmentation and regionalization of the Indian party system may also be connected with the rise in the political awareness among the electorate, and the spread of "identity politics". According to the survey conducted in 1996 by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), 58.7% of respondents thought that their voting could have some effect, which was 10.3 points higher than the results in the survey conducted in 1971. Also, 68.8% of respondents expressed support for democracy, which was 25.4 points higher than the results in 1971 [Yadav 2000: 138-140]. Furthermore, Indian caste groups are now
Table 2  Results of the Latest Legislative Assembly Elections in the States and the Union Territories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Largest party and the number of seats</th>
<th>Second largest party and the number of seats</th>
<th>ENP (s)</th>
<th>ENP (v)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (185)</td>
<td>Telugu Desam (47)</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (34)</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (9)</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (71)</td>
<td>Asom Gana Parishad (20)</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
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<td>Bihar</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>Janata Dal (United) (88)</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (55)</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>6.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chhattisgarh</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (50)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (37)</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goa</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (17)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (16)</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>3.45</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (127)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (51)</td>
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<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (67)</td>
<td>Indian National Lok Dal (9)</td>
<td>1.73</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>3.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir National Conference (28)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (20)</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>5.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (30)</td>
<td>Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (17)</td>
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<td>7.89</td>
</tr>
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<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (79)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (65)</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kerala</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>140</td>
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<td>5.93</td>
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<td>1.68</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>Nationalist Congress Party (71)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (69)</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>6.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (20)</td>
<td>Federal Party of Manipur (13)</td>
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<td>6.76</td>
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<td>2003</td>
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<td>Indian National Congress (22)</td>
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<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Mizo National Front (21)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (12)</td>
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<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>Indian National Congress (21)</td>
<td>Nagaland Peoples Front (19)</td>
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<td>2004</td>
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<td>Biju Janata Dal (61)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (38)</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (62)</td>
<td>Shiromani Akali Dal (41)</td>
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<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (120)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (56)</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikkim</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Sikkim Democratic Front (31)</td>
<td>Indian National Congress (1)</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (132)</td>
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<td>2.81</td>
<td>4.75</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>Indian National Congress (13)</td>
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<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<td>Samajwadi Party (143)</td>
<td>Bahujan Samaj Party (98)</td>
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<td>5.74</td>
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<td>Uttarakhand</td>
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<td>Bharatiya Janata Party (19)</td>
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<td>Delhi</td>
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<td>Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (7)</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>7.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: See Figure 1a and 1b.
Note: “Total” means the total number of seats in each Legislative Assembly.
ENP(s) is based on seat shares of the parties. ENP(v) is based on vote shares of the parties.
highly politicized [Sheth 1999], and the incidences of violence are on the rise mainly due to
the conflicts among caste groups or religious groups. Electorates are mobilized according
to their social identities, and examples of such identity politics are frequently observed
[Hirose 2002: 80-81, 87-92].

4. Sartori’s Typology of Party Systems

4.1 Seven Categories of Party Systems

The most often-quoted research work on party politics is the work by Giovanni Sartori,
which was published in 1976. Using indicators such as the number and the size of relevant
parties, the ideological distance of the polity, and the intensity of the given ideological
setting, Sartori categorizes party systems into seven types: (1) one party system, (2)
hegemonic party system, (3) predominant party system, (4) two party system, (5) moderate
pluralism, (6) polarized pluralism, and (7) atomized party system [Sartori 1976: Chapter 5].
I have already explained the “predominant party system” model in Section 2.1 of this
paper. Sartori’s research work focuses on elaborating the typology of party systems and on
a detailed analysis of the characteristics of each party system. His explanatory models are
useful “tools” for analyzing the characteristics of party systems in each country.

However, compared with his detailed analysis of the typology of party systems and
the characteristics of each party system, his explanation about the transition of party
systems is not sufficient. According to Sartori, “one party system” and “hegemonic party
system” are categorized as a “non-competitive” party systems, whereas “predominant
party system”, “two party system”, “moderate pluralism”, and “polarized pluralism” are
categorized as “competitive” party systems [Sartori 1976: 281-283]. He claims that the
transition between a non-competitive system and a competitive system involves a “system
breakdown”. By “system breakdown” he means “basic changes” in “the authority structures
of a polity beyond and outside its inner mechanisms of change” [Sartori 1976: 275]. On
the other hand, within the category of non-competitive systems or competitive systems,
“the transitions from one system to another occur without breakdown, without altering the
rules of the game” [Sartori 1976: 284-285]. Sartori explains the transition of party systems
in some detail in Chapter 9 of his book. However, there is very little explanation about the
factors contributing to the transition or the mechanisms of the transition.

4.2 Moderate Pluralism and Polarized Pluralism

As I argued in Section 3.2, the contemporary Indian party system shows signs of
“fragmentation”. In order to understand the characteristics of the Indian party system
in this period, Sartori’s two models—moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism—may
be useful.

Before going into detail about these two models, we need to examine the difference
between the “format” and the “type” of party systems. “Format” is a classification of party
systems “according to the numerical criterion”. That is, “how many parties they contain” [Sartori 1976: 128]. These parties must be “relevant”. According to Sartori, if a party has “coalition potential” or “blackmail potential”, that party is called a “relevant party”. He says that “we must count all the parties that have either a governmental relevance in the coalition-forming arena, or a competitive relevance in the oppositional arena” [Sartori 1976: 123]. On the other hand, “type” is the mechanics and properties of party systems. That is, “how the system works”. Sartori says that “the format is interesting to the extent that it contains mechanical predispositions, that it goes to determine a set of functional properties of the party system first, and of the overall political system as a consequence” [Sartori 1976: 128-129].

As a preliminary step toward separating moderate pluralism from polarized pluralism, we need to classify party systems according to the number of relevant parties, that is, the “format” of the party system. According to Sartori, the “turning point” is “between five and six parties” [Sartori 1976: 131]. If a polity has up to 5 parties and shows a tendency of low fragmentation of political parties, the party system is then classified as “limited pluralism”. On the other hand, if a polity has more than 5 parties and shows a tendency of high fragmentation of political parties, then the party system is classified as “extreme pluralism”. It needs to be noted that the distinction between “limited pluralism” and “extreme pluralism” is solely based on the number of relevant parties.

The distinction between “moderate pluralism” and “polarized pluralism” is mainly based on the criterion of an “ideological distance”, which is defined as “the overall spread of the ideological spectrum of any given polity” [Sartori 1976: 126]. If there are major ideological differences among parties, then ideological distance of the party system becomes large. If ideological distance is considered large, then the “type” of the party system becomes “polarized pluralism”. If ideological distance is considered small, then the “type” becomes “moderate pluralism” [Sartori 1976: 126-127].

Moreover, limited pluralism with low fragmentation of political parties tends to create moderate pluralism, whereas extreme pluralism with high fragmentation of political parties tends to create polarized pluralism [Sartori 1976: 127]. In other words, if the number of parties is small, ideological differences among political parties also tend to be small, and the party system tends to become moderate pluralism. On the other hand, if the number of parties is large, ideological differences among political parties also tend to be large, and the party system tends to become polarized pluralism.

4.3 Characteristics of Moderate Pluralism and Polarized Pluralism

Although Sartori offers many features of moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism [Sartori 1976: 132-140, 178-179], two characteristics are the most important in order to distinguish between these two party systems: (1) the presence of relevant anti-system parties, and (2) the existence of bilateral oppositions. If a party system has these two characteristics, it becomes polarized pluralism. If not, it becomes moderate pluralism.
According to Sartori,

Whenever the question is whether the numerical criterion is a reliable indicator, one can swiftly check by ascertaining whether or not a more-than-two party system contains anti-system parties and bilateral oppositions. If the system does not, we are definitely confronted with a case of moderate pluralism [Sartori 1976: 179].

As for a definition of anti-system parties, Sartori notes that “a party can be defined as being anti-system whenever it undermines the legitimacy of the regime it opposes”, and “an anti-system party would not change—if it could—the government but the very system of government” [Sartori 1976: 133]. I think the term “anti-system” should be restated as “anti-regime”. In Sartori’s typology, the main criterion for distinguishing between moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism is “ideological distance”. The concept of “ideological distance” is somewhat ambiguous, and it is difficult to measure ideological distance based on objective criteria. However, if a party system contains anti-system parties, we can say that the ideological distance of that party system is quite large. According to Sartori,

Thus the hard core of the concept is singled out by noting that an anti-system opposition abides by a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates. According to the strict definition, then, anti-system parties represent an extraneous ideology—thereby indicating a polity confronted with a maximal ideological distance [Sartori 1976: 133].

The second characteristic of polarized pluralism is the existence of “bilateral oppositions”. This concept of “bilateral oppositions” is based on the assumption that the ideological difference among the political parties spreads along the one-dimensional ideological space of left-to-right. According to Sartori, “When the opposition is unilateral, i.e., all located on one side vis-à-vis the government, no matter how many parties oppose it, they can join forces and propose themselves as an alternative government”. However, “in the polarized polities we find instead two oppositions that are mutually exclusive: They cannot join forces. In fact, the two opposing groups are closer, if anything, to the governing parties than to one another” [Sartori 1976: 134].

In a party system which has “bilateral oppositions”, a certain party or a group of parties tend to exist at the center of the ideological dimension. Therefore, the mechanics of polarized pluralism become multipolar. According to Sartori, “while the mechanics of moderate pluralism is bipolar precisely because the system is not center based, the mechanics of polarized pluralism is multipolar and cannot be explained, therefore, by a dualistic model” [Sartori 1976: 134].

Sartori shows a rather negative view of polarized pluralism. Criticizing a polarized pluralism as “an unhealthy state of affairs for a body politic”, he evaluates this party system
Immoderate and ideological politics is conductive either to sheer paralysis or to a disorderly sequence of ill-calculated reforms that end in failure. This does not necessarily imply that the polarized polities are doomed to impotence and, ultimately, to self-destruction. They are, however, hardly in a position to cope with explosive or exogenous crises [Sartori 1976: 140].

On the other hand, Sartori shows a relatively positive view of moderate pluralism. He says that “it would be redundant to specify how many consequences do not follow—this is simply a matter of putting the minus sign wherever polarized pluralism obtains the plus sign” [Sartori 1976: 179]. It seems that Sartori thinks of moderate pluralism as being preferable to polarized pluralism, though he does not state explicitly on this point.

4.4 Assessment of Sartori’s Models

As I described in this section, Sartori gives detailed explanation about the difference between moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism and the characteristics of each party system. However, I want to draw attention to two points that are unclear in his models.

First, Sartori does not sufficiently explain the possibilities of the coexistence of extreme pluralism and moderate pluralism (i.e. extreme but moderate pluralism), or limited pluralism and polarized pluralism (i.e. limited but polarized pluralism). In other words, under some conditions, even if the number of parties is large, ideological differences among parties might not become so large, and moderate pluralism might be formed. In a similar way, even if the number of parties is small, ideological differences among parties might become very large, and polarized pluralism might be formed. Although Sartori points out the possibilities of these “mismatched” cases, he calls them “deviant cases” or “mixed cases” [Sartori 1976: 286-292], and devotes very few pages of his book to the explanation about these cases.

Second, as I mentioned in Section 4.1, Sartori’s explanation about the transition of party systems is not sufficient. According to Sartori, the transition between moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism may occur without a “system breakdown” (See Section 4.1 of this article). However, he explains very little about the factors or the mechanisms of such a transition. Regarding the relationships between the “format” and the “type” of party systems, there would be following questions: Does the transition between moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism always involve a change in the number of parties? Alternatively, can the transition between moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism occur, even if the number of parties does not change?

In Section 5, I analyze the Indian party system since the late 1980s. By presenting my empirical research findings in relation to the case of Indian party politics, I try to give some answers to the points that are unclear in Sartori’s models.
5. Party System Change in India Since the Late 1990s

As stated in Section 3.2, the Indian party system since the late 1980s shows the tendency of fragmentation and regionalization. Moreover, the political awareness among the electorate is rising, and “identity politics” is spreading. When we consider these tendencies in Indian politics and follow Sartori’s explanation about moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism, it seems to be inevitable that India will have polarized pluralism. In fact, the Indian party system in the first half of the 1990s showed the feature of polarized pluralism. However, the Indian party system has been changing from polarized pluralism to moderate pluralism since the 1998 Lok Sabha election.

5.1 Polarized pluralism until 1997

The coalition government established by the National Front in 1989 finally collapsed in March 1991. During the period of the National Front government, two important political events took place, often referred to as “Mandal and Mandir”.

“Mandal” refers to the Report of the Backward Classes Commission submitted to the central government in 1980. This report is often called the “Mandal Commission Report” named after the chairman of the commission, B. P. Mandal. This report recommended a reservation of jobs in the central government and public enterprises for “Other Backward Classes (OBC)”\(^5\). In August 1990, the National Front government, led by the Prime Minister V. P. Singh, decided to implement the plans drawn up in the Mandal Commission Report and to reserve 27% of jobs in the central government and public enterprises for OBC. This decision provoked a strong objection from the people of the upper castes, especially in northern India.

“Mandir” means “temple”. “Temple” here refers to the Ram Temple which is believed to have existed in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Although Ayodhya is believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu God Ram, there was an Islamic mosque called “Babri Masjid” at the place where the Ram Temple is believed to have existed. Since the middle of the 1980s, the BJP mobilized the electorate by advancing “Hindu nationalism”. One of the strategies adopted by the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was to start the movement for building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. Their claim was to demolish the Babri Masjid and to build a new Ram Temple. Through this “Ayodhya Movement”, the BJP attracted support from the Hindus and expanded its power [Hasan 1998: 189-205; Brass 1993a: 121-123].

These two political events of “Mandal“ and “Mandir” were somewhat interrelated. V. P. Singh decided to implement the Mandal Commission Report in order to increase the public support for himself, and to get ahead of the leadership competition within the JD
[Oshikawa 1994: 27-28]. At the same time, V. P. Singh intended to prevent the support of
the Hindus from concentrating on the BJP [Brass 1993b: 255-258]. On the other hand,
because of the decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report, the BJP’s support
base of the Hindus was divided by the conflict between the upper castes and the lower
castes. In order to tackle this problem, the BJP had to go on with the “Ayodhya Movement”
more strongly [Hasan 1998: 156-157; Brass 1993b: 256]. The Ayodhya Movement was
getting more violent at the outset of the 1990s. In the aftermath of the conflict between the
BJP and the National Front government over the Ayodhya Movement, the BJP withdrew
its support to the government in 1990, which triggered the collapse of the government in

The Ayodhya Movement intensified even after the collapse of the National Front
government. Finally, the Babri Masjid was demolished on December 6, 1992 by some
members of the BJP, the VHP, and the RSS. The BJP’s strategy of attracting support
through the Ayodhya Movement was one of the “extraparliamentary challenges to the party
system” [Singh 1992: 305]. The BJP’s strategies change according to many political factors,
such as change of leadership or organizational structure within the party, relationships
with other parties, and changes in domestic or international political situations [Hirose
1994a: 19-20]. Therefore, it is difficult to say that the BJP is totally an “anti-system” party.
However, I think that at least in the political context of the late 1980s and the early 1990s,
the BJP’s strategy and behavior were “anti-systemic”.

From the viewpoint of change in the party system, the withdrawal of support by the
BJP to the National Front government in 1990 was the turning point. After that, the
structure of the Indian party system became tripolar: the Congress Party, the BJP, and the
coalition of the National Front and Left parties. Because of the insistence of the BJP on
“Hindu nationalism”, the possibilities for cooperation between the BJP and other parties
were very slim. As stated in Section 4.3, the tripolar structure of the party system is one
of the characteristics of polarized pluralism. The Indian party system in the early 1990s,
therefore, had both characteristics of polarized pluralism: anti-system parties and bilateral
oppositions.

The BJP’s anti-systemic strategy and behavior continued even after the collapse of the
National Front government and the establishment of the central government led by the
Congress Party in 1991. As stated above, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was demolished
in 1992, when the Congress Party was in power. Moreover, the structure of the party
system was still tripolar. Although the Congress Party government established in 1991
was a minority government, the BJP and the National Front could not cooperate with
each other to bring down the government. Therefore, the Indian party system from 1991
to 1996, when the Congress Party was in power, also had the characteristics of polarized
pluralism.

The tripolar party system also emerged after the 1996 Lok Sabha election. In this
election, the BJP captured 29.7% of the seats, and became the largest party in the parliament
for the first time. The Congress Party captured only 25.8% of the seats, which was the lowest since independence (See Figure 1b). After the election, the BJP tried to establish the central government. However, because the BJP could not have a sufficient number of parties to join the coalition, it failed to establish the government. In the meantime, the National Front and the Left parties formed the coalition named “United Front”, and formed the central government. However, the United Front needed the support of the Congress Party in order to maintain the government. The cooperative relationship between the United Front and the Congress Party was unstable. Finally, the United Front government collapsed in 1997 because of the withdrawal of support by the Congress Party.

### 5.2 Transition to Moderate Pluralism

The Indian party system in the first half of the 1990s had the characteristics of polarized pluralism. However, since the late 1990s, the party system in India gradually made a transition to moderate pluralism. There are mainly three direct causes of this transition. All of these causes are related to the strategies of the parties.

First, the BJP changed its strategy. After the 1996 Lok Sabha election, the BJP failed to establish the central government because it could not find coalition partners. The BJP’s insistence on Hindu nationalism was not acceptable to other parties. However, the BJP gradually softened its stance in order to obtain the cooperation of other parties. In the 1998 Lok Sabha election, the BJP campaigned without contending Hindu nationalism. After the election, the BJP succeeded in winning a sufficient number of coalition partners, and forming the central government. The BJP is currently leading the party coalition named “National Democratic Alliance (NDA)”.

This did not mean that the BJP had given up the ideology of Hindu nationalism. Whereas the BJP took a stance of placing importance on cooperation with the coalition partners, its ideology of Hindu nationalism was frequently mentioned in the resolutions adopted at the National Executive Meetings and the speeches of the party leaders. However, such resolutions and speeches rarely led to actions which might erode the cooperation with other parties. It is conceivable that the BJP took such a stance in order to show their consideration for the intention of the RSS, the parent organization of the BJP, on the one hand, and to maintain the cooperation with the coalition partners on the other.

Second, the Congress Party had also changed its strategy, though it was a little late. For a long time, the Congress Party had wanted to establish the central government by itself, and had been reluctant to make a coalition with other parties. In fact, whereas the Congress Party had supported the coalition government from outside in 1990 and in 1996, it had little experience in leading the coalition government by its own effort. However, just before the 2004 Lok Sabha election, the Congress Party changed its policy, and articulated the stance of making a coalition with other parties. After winning this election, the Congress Party formed the coalition named “United Progressive Alliance (UPA)” and established the central government with the support of the Left parties.
Third, one of the “poles” of the tripolar party system had disappeared. One of the reasons for the disappearance of a “pole” was the split of the JD, which had been the core of the National Front. As a result of the split of the JD, the following parties came into existence: Samajwadi Janata Party (SJP) (separated from the JD in 1990), Samajwadi Party (SP) (separated from the SJP in 1992), Samata Party (separated from the JD in 1994), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) (separated from the JD in 1997), Biju Janata Dal (BJD) (separated from the JD in 1997), JD (United) and JD (Secular) (split of the JD in 1999), and Lok Jan Shakti (LJP) (separated from the JD (United) in 2000).

The main causes of the split of the JD were the leadership struggle within the party, and the concern for regional interests. Currently, most of these “Janata-origin” parties have their own power bases in a specific state or a region. For these “Janata-origin” parties and many regional parties, which had increased since the late 1980s, the main concern was maintaining their own regional power bases. And for this end, it was constructive for them to make a coalition with the ruling party and have a connection with the central government. In so doing, the ideological difference of the “right” and the “left” was less of an obstacle for them. Consequently, these “Janata-origin” parties and regional parties have become important supply sources of coalition partners for both the Congress Party and the BJP.

As a result of these changes, two characteristics of polarized pluralism disappeared, and the party system in India made a transition to the bipolar system with the two “poles” of the Congress Party and the BJP. Today, almost every party seems to have reached a certain degree of consensus that the making of a coalition government is unavoidable at the center. Therefore, although the combination of the party coalition might be changeable, the bipolar party system itself seems relatively stable.

6. Conclusion

As revealed in Section 5, the party system in India has changed from polarized pluralism to moderate pluralism. The process of transition to moderate pluralism started in the late 1990s, and now seems to be completed. As I stated in Section 5.2, this transition was the result of the changes of the strategies of the Congress Party and the BJP, and the split of the JD.

It should be noted that during the period of this transition, the number of relevant parties did not change very much. As shown in Figure 2, the scores of ENP based on seat shares increased rapidly from the period of 1989 to 1996, and remains at a high level since 1996. That is to say, the “format” of the Indian party system has remained one of “extreme pluralism” since the late 1980s. Therefore, the case of India suggests that the transition from polarized pluralism to moderate pluralism may occur without a change in the number of parties. The case of India also suggests that under a certain combination of strategies of political parties, relationships among the parties, and some social and political factors,
The Transition of Party System in India

moderate pluralism can be formed even in the situation of high fragmentation of political parties. As I stated in Section 4, the possibilities of such cases are predicted in Sartori’s models. Therefore, the findings in this article do not refute Sartori’s thesis. However, the case of Indian party system is important in the sense that it gives “actual” examples of the topics which are not explained sufficiently in Sartori’s models, and that it will be able to complement and elaborate his models.

The transition of the party system in India since the late 1990s was caused by “party factors” such as the changes of the strategies of the Congress Party and the BJP, and the split of the JD. This transition also seems to be facilitated by other social and political factors. What kind of social and political factors, then, contributed to the transition to moderate pluralism in India? Although we have to carry out further studies in this respect, I will briefly consider two factors.

First, regional diversity in Indian society might be a stabilizing factor. In India, the demographic composition of social groups, characteristics of the politically and socially dominant groups, or the patterns of competition among the political parties differ from one state or region to another. It is likely that, due to this regional diversity, conflicts among social groups in one place rarely spread to the national level. Even the Hindu nationalist movement, led by the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations, cannot become a national phenomenon.

Second, in the recent Lok Sabha elections or the State Assembly elections, a phenomenon called “anti-incumbency factor” is observed. That is to say, the electorate tends to evaluate the performances of the governments harshly, and the ruling parties are often defeated in the elections [Kondo 2001: 138-140; Miwa 2003: 32-33]. The reasons for this phenomenon might be: (1) the rise in political awareness among the electorate (See Section 3), and (2) the growing importance of the roles played by the opposition parties due to regionalization of the Indian party system.

This “anti-incumbency factor” might provide an incentive for the opposition parties not to take extreme actions against the government. In recent elections in India, defeated parties tend to announce, immediately after the declaration of the election results, that they will “accept the people’s verdict” and “take responsibility as an opposition”. They hardly criticize the election outcome or the democratic political system itself. It might be rational for the defeated parties to take the stance of respecting the election outcome and to act as an opposition, because there are abundant opportunities for them to defeat the ruling parties in the near future.

These two factors regarding regional diversity and electoral politics might be acting as stabilizing factors and might have facilitated a transition to moderate pluralism. However, these considerations are still largely conjectural. In order to clearly understand the factors and mechanisms of the transition of the Indian party system, we have to examine the relationship between society and politics in India in more detail. This is a task for the next research work.
Notes

1) I consulted Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee [1999], Ochiai [1993], Nakamura [1993], Horimoto [1997], and newspapers and magazines published in India for details regarding the history of party politics in India.

2) In his description of predominant party system, Sartori mentions the concept of “parties of pressure”, created by Kothari [Sartori 1976: 216]. Although the models developed by Kothari and Morris-Jones are concerned primarily with the case of India, the mechanism of the relationship between the ruling party and the opposition parties can be generalized as one of the characteristics of the predominant party system.

3) ENP is the multiplicative inverse of sum of squares of the vote share or the seat share of each party. ENP based on vote shares ($N_v$) is calculated as follows:

$$N_v = \frac{1}{\sum \nu_i^2}$$

Where, $\nu_i$ is the vote proportion of the $i$-th party. ENP based on seat shares ($N_s$) is calculated as follows:

$$N_s = \frac{1}{\sum s_i^2}$$

Where, $s_i$ is the seat proportion of the $i$-th party. If vote shares (or seat shares) of all the parties were identical, ENP would be equal to the actual number of parties. If there were differences in vote shares (or seat shares) of the parties, ENP would be less than the actual number of parties, based on the degree of the differences. For details, see Laakso and Taagepera [1979] and Lijphart [1994: 67-72].

4) Sartori developed his typology of party systems as a criticism of the research work done by Maurice Duverger. In his book published in 1954, Duverger offered three types of party systems: single party, two-party system, and multi-partism [Duverger 1963 (1954): 206-280]. Duverger’s typology of party systems was solely based on the number of parties in a political system. Sartori criticized Duverger’s typology of the party systems, and developed his own typology based on the ideological factor as well as the numerical factor of the parties [Sartori 1976: Chapter 5].

5) In the Constitution of India, socially and economically backward castes and minority tribes are specified, and some seats of the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assembly and jobs in the central government and the public enterprises are reserved for them. They
are called “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes”. In addition, the Constitution also stipulates that the government should take care of “other backward classes”, other than Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. For details, see Bayly [1999: 266-305], Yamaguchi [1984], and Kochu [2005].

References


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