DISSERTATION SUMMARY
THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF PARTY SYSTEM CHANGE IN INDIA: IDEOLOGY, ORGANIZATION AND COMPETITION

Indian politics has seen an unprecedented transformation in the last decade. The most obvious marker of this change is manifested in the party system, which at the national level has been altered from a predominant party system to a regionalized tri-polar party system. The central purpose of this dissertation is to provide a comprehensive explanation of this change.

An outline of major changes in the Indian party system in the period 1989-1999 must include the following developments: (a) The central feature of this period has been the decline of the Indian National Congress, for long the inevitable nodal reference point of both political practice and theoretical reflection on Indian politics. It has been definitively dislodged from the position of the center round which all political calculations must of necessity revolve. (b) The trend towards regionalization of the party system, a trend already strong in the 1980’s, has substantially deepened. It extended its significance from the state level to the Central level for the first time with the National Front government in 1989, a coalition that included a number of regional parties. (c) This decade saw a sharp rise in political mobilization on the basis of social cleavages based on ascriptive identities, in particular of religion and caste. This was intimately tied as both cause and effect of party system change. A noteworthy feature is that the identities invoked were not ‘natural’ cleavages; partisan politics has a lot to do with their creation and dissemination. (d) Central to parliamentary government is the process of government formation and the constitution of the cabinet. In the period 1989-’99, this process resulted in, variously, majority coalition, minority coalition, and single-party minority governments.

Theoretical Approach

In order to explain these changes, I draw upon the three sets of theoretical literatures. The first is the influence of institutional variables in shaping the evolution of the party system. The second issue relates to the role of cleavages, or more precisely how cleavages are politicized through the dynamic of party competition. Third, there is also a separate body of work on parties as organizations. Explanations of the trajectory of party system change in India will have to combine these three factors.

My theoretical intention is to unite these three disparate classes of explanations, but in addition to re-cast them all in a strategic interaction basis. That is, I will aim to anchor the explanations in purposive action on the part of voters and parties, including opening up the black box of parties themselves and treating them as ensembles of strategic actors.

The general theoretical approach followed in this dissertation is a strategic interaction perspective, which stresses that agents are “intendedly rational” (cf. H. Simon), but within a specific transactional or contractual environment. The starting point of the approach is the spatial theory elaborated by Anthony Downs. This is the one body of theory that explicitly links voter preferences to party/candidate strategies and derives an equilibrium, which is the joint outcome from which none would wish to deviate. However, what the Downsian theory lacks, and which I hope to contribute, is a lack of specification of what parties are. This dissertation insists that we need to take a party as an institution seriously. Downs postulates
that parties are ‘teams interested in governing;’ however, this ignores internal strategic interaction within each team, and all the complications that this introduces in any serious attempt to run an ongoing organization of some durability in time and magnitude in numbers. It also ignores the social solidarity-type motivations, which, as I will argue later, have been the core strength of many of the strongest parties in the historical record. To remedy these weaknesses, I postulate what I call a transaction cost politics (TCP) theory of parties. I elaborate this TCP theory of parties in two aspects of party behavior: intra-party, and inter-party interactions. I spell these out in greater detail in chapter two and three (see below). The TCP framework casts light on:

(i) Party-as-organization
(ii) Party-in-government: The theory of party coalitions and party alliances (extra-legislative, electoral)
(iii) Party-in-electorate: This entails establishing a connection to social cleavage theory, but with full recognition of the strategic character of the introduction of a new way of aligning the electorate around a new cultural-ideological axis. What is missing from both major branches of the literature (institutional and social cleavage) is a stress on how strategic political entrepreneurship may actively create new cleavages rather than passively adapting to a prior cleavage.