

Federalism & Coalition Politics: A Study on Indian Context

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Abstract: *In Indian political system, coalition politics is a matter of fact. In contemporary India various regional political parties have become an important part of politics in state as well as centre and the growth of separatist movements being threatening for the unity of the nation. So, the centre state relations have been gotten new dimension and importance. The close Nexus and dialectical relationship between structures and processes that lead to significant variations in the functioning of political structure and institution. The changes that occur in the role of the party system constitute undoubtedly the most crucial variable in the analysis of changes at the institutional and structural level. Actually, the relationships between the national and regional parties are largely dependent on the functions of the members of the parties at the central and regional levels establish with each other. All the National parties are now fully realised the fact that none of them can singly get a majority to form a government at least in the near future. India's mother political party Congress which is in power at centre nearly 40 years also now fully aware of the fact that they need to form some sort of coalition group to occupy the power at the centre and states. The last few decades we are witnessed that how hung parliaments become as permanent feature of the largest democracy with enduring impact.*

Key words: *Federalism, Democracy, Government, Decentralisation, Sovereignty, Factionalism, Authoritarianism.*

India opted for a federal constitution with a strong parliamentary centre because of divisive history and the partition of the country at the time of independence and also the fear of similar threat to national unity in future. In contemporary India various regional political parties have become an important part of politics in state as well as centre and the growth of separatist movements being threatening for the unity of the nation. So, the centre state relations have been gotten new dimension and importance. In this situation we can feel that why Granville Austin like to call Indian federalism as 'co-operative federalism' which "produces a strong central... government, it does not necessarily result in weak provincial governments that are largely administrative agencies for central policies."¹ It is true that before and after independence in India the desirability of the federal form of government was questioned mainly because of the diverse nature of the nation in terms of caste, language, religion, culture and so on. In this sense "a federal structure, especially in and underdeveloped country is based on the concept of maintaining unity in diversity. The problem is how to preserve unity by recognising diversity; and the manner and extent to which diversity can be allowed to express itself without affecting stability. The principle is to allow and encourage the federal unit to do how they are capable of doing without harming the interest of the other states and units."² Federalism is not a static concept rather it is a continuous process of composition and recomposition of federal units. So the problem is how much power should be allocated between the units and centre. "The increasing administrative competence, strength and maturity of the federal units, and the local bodies within these units, point toward greater decentralization."³

The close Nexus and dialectical relationship between structures and processes that lead to significant variations in the functioning of political structure and institution. One can thus distinguish the phases in the life of Institutions corresponding to the phases in the evolution of political processes. Changes at the structural levels have therefore to be viewed in a historical perspective and constantly related to the basic socio-economic realities reflected in political processes. The changes that occur in the role of the party system constitute undoubtedly the most crucial variable in the analysis of changes at the institutional and structural level. In this context, the political parties play an important role in the political process. Actually, the relationships between the national and regional parties are largely dependent on the functions of the members of the parties at the central and regional levels establish with each other. The intra-party relationship assumes more importance for the development and smooth functioning of the federal system as the party members operating the governmental structure at the central level are co-partisans of those operating the structure at regional level. If at times the ruling party at the regional level are different from the central level, the confrontation between the political parties influence to the great extent on the legislative, administrative and the financial relations between the central and regional governments. In this context W.H. Riker rightly observed: "Whatever the general social

conditions, if any, that sustain the federal bargain, there is one institutional condition that controls the nature of the bargain... this is the structure of party system, which may be regarded as the main variable intervening the background social conditions and the specific nature of the federal bargain.”⁴ He also observed that “centralising and decentralising tendencies of a federal system mainly depends upon the degree to which the parties are operating in the central Government and control parties in the present government.”⁵ As a liberal parliamentary democracy as well as pluralist society, India has been living with a multi-party system in which several political parties continuously engaged in the political process.

In India most of the major political parties are established in the pre-date of India’s federal republic. The Congress emerged as a political party in the late 1920. During that period certain ideological polarisation was emerged in the Indian politics not only that a more organised revolutionary force came into existence. In the early phases the leader of the congress became apprehensive about maintaining unity and wanted to promote central control. When the Congress Party assumed power in several provinces in 1937 under the Government of India Act (1935), there was a tendency to renew emphasis on party discipline and central dominance. Again in 1946, when Congress members assumed power in several provinces, then the party characteristics of the Congress started to assert themselves. Actually, the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist party were operating under the same or new levels in India’s pre-independence period, which were their origins in the pre-independence period. The structure of Indian federal system provides a framework for the operation of the political parties which was strong operation towards centralisation. The evolution of Indian political economy had helped to grow new political elites from rural areas. The dominance of New Delhi has been challenged continue from them who, in collaboration with the mainly state-based political parties, have made demands for greater federalisation of India’s political system. In this situation the Congress Working Committee played a vital role in formulating all-India policies and coordinating Union State relations. The committee took decision about all the matters of States such as land reforms, Zamindari abolition, cooperative farming and primary education etc. Some author observed that the significance of unitary rule as the crucial factor to the development of the predominance at the Centre in the period up to 1967 and after 1980, "By and, large, the effect of the Congress organisation on the Union-State relations was to emphasise the strength of the Central Government and the relative subordination of the state Governments.”⁶ Asok Chanda, Chairman of the Third Finance Commission, remarks: "One has facilitated and even encouraged Parliament to consider itself as the apex of a legislative and executive pyramid. The Prime Ministers and other Ministers have not hesitated to take an indirect and sometimes even a direct hand in settling and deciding issues which are constitutionally the responsibility of the States. The limited sovereignty of the states is thus being surrendered by usage and sufferance and it would be difficult for a State later to reassert or regain its constitutional authority. It may be claimed that the 'advice' tendered by the Union Ministers is in their capacity as members of the Congress High Command and that there has thus been no infringement of the sovereignty of States. The sophistry will hardly delude many.”⁷ It was seen that an extra-constitutional channels have led to a high degree of centralisation in the working of Indian federal System. Surprising matter is that whatever the Centre could not impose on the State through the Constitution it could easily enforce through the party channels. The dynamic context of political parties has become the way of visualisation of changing dimension of the federalising process in India. In that period there have been two types of instabilities in the Indian States. One was that there are situations in which no one party has been able to capture enough votes in the assembly to form alone, or in stable coalitions with others, to run the government successfully. Other was that the Chief Ministers have been unable to get support within the Congress Party.

Phase I (1947-67)

In this said phase called by Rajni Kothari as ‘One Party Dominance System’ or ‘The Congress System’.⁸ Since independence, however, personal and internal politics have come to dominate the internal affairs of the State Congress. According to Paul R. Brass, “fractional conflicts within the Congress Party are so great that the State Government is in a state of paralysis since almost any governmental action is likely to disturb the balance of power among the party factions. Factionalism, lack of commitment, and a low degree of loyalty pervade Congress politics in U.P.”⁹ Differences which had existed earlier among Congressmen in U.P. changed in the form of internal political crisis. The defection of a group of socialists from the Congress in 1948 was one. This brought to an end the ideological conflict in U.P. Congress politics. Another was the election of P. Tandon as the President of Indian National Congress precipitated another political crisis. "He was the symbol in his home state (U.P.) and in the country of Hindi and Hindu culture, of Hindi revivalism that opposed to secularism. The resignation of Tandon under pressure and the assumption of the seat by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1951 made significant impact on the Congress in U.P.”¹⁰ Gradually with no issues left for importance in the U.P politics. Congress started revolving around factional politics. Since 1955, the Congress Party has revolved around a struggle to gain or control the office of Chief Minister by dominating the party organisation in the internal politics of U.P.

This period includes the formation and Communist-led-governments in opposition to the party in power in the Centre in the State of Kerala. There were two important aspects, of the first CPI-led ministry in independent India. First of all the taking of power by the C.P.I. in any part of India through the electoral process was strongly opposed to the Congress Party and the Central Government. Even Nehru, the champion of parliamentary democracy, was unhappy to think that an Indian state should have elected a CPI-led government to power. This meant both the organisation of the Congress Party at the national level and the Central Government controlled by that party had too much interested in bringing down the Kerala CPI-led Government at the earliest possible opportunity. In the Communist Party National Council Meeting in 1958, the Council adopted a resolution viewing the "tactics and methods of the Congress against the Communist Ministry in Kerala"¹¹ as a challenge to all healthy norms of public life and to the future of Indian democracy. It was said in the Congress Working Committee's resolution on Kerala "the danger in Kerala is not merely the right of a non-Congress Government to exist and function, but the very fundamentals of democracy and democratic institutions are challenged. By their actions, the Congress leaders have put the Constitution to a severe strain. The greatest damage to the Constitution and to, democracy is being caused by the utterances and acts of leaders of the Congress Party and Central Government which amount to instigation of officials in Kerala against the State Government or otherwise demoralize them."¹² Another serious intention was on the part of C.P.I. to introduce the reform measures of a far reaching impact in order to achieve certain targets to which the Congress Party had got into the habits of committing itself to achieve the result of quickly polarising politics in the state of Kerala. This meant that all the reactionary and counter revolutionary forces would have been prepared to accept a mild dose of radicalism than a C.P.I. in power combined together 'to confront the government. The party declared: "The party now aims at the replacement of the present anti-democratic and anti-popular government of people's democracy created on the basis of a coalition of democratic and anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces in the country."¹³

Phase II (1968-71)

It was true that Congress had been reduced to a minority in 1967, in U.P. it was still the largest party in the Assembly and out of 425 seats the Congress Party won 195 seats in the 1967 elections. As no party got majority, there was no option but to form a coalition government. To form a United Front government the opposition parties joined together and elected Ram Chandra Vikal as their leader. But with the support of a few defectors C.B. Gupta formed a Congress Government. The government was toppled when Charan Singh and his faction defected to the opposition after only 18 days. Charan Singh became the Chief Minister. The President rule was imposed when he resigned in 1968. In Kerala the climate on the eve of Fourth General Elections was not favourable for the Congress. A.K. Gopalan in a statement at Delhi said that C.P.I.(M) was ready to form an alliance with any party to end Congress monopoly.¹⁴ In Kerala a United Front government was forged. "E.M.S. Nampoodiripad became the Chief Minister of the seven party United Front."¹⁵ The Marxists leaders of the United Front were trying to focus public attention on the alleged neglect by the Centre of the development of the State. They exert pressure on the Central Government to redefine Centre-State relationship in the changed situation. The formation of the coalition ministries led by Congress as well as non-Congress parties was the main issue of this phase. Primary objective of non-Congress parties was to oust the Congress from power by any way. This phase was characterised by the period of fragmentation and instability in which political parties and groups united or deviated frequently. The primary aim of this period was attaining or retaining political power. During this period Regional Parties did articulate the local issues to mobilise the people of their own regions. Even earlier D.M.K. in Tamil Nadu, Muslim Conference in Jammu and Kashmir, Akali Dal in Punjab etc. became active. After the break-up of uni-party rule in 1967 these parties challenged the Congress Party. In Tamil Nadu D.M.K. came to power followed by Akali Dal's electoral success in 1969 mid-term polls, in Kerala Muslim League and Jan Sangh in U.P. gained success.

Phase III (1972-88)

During the period from 1971-77 and 1980-89 was characterised by charismatic leadership. Opposition parties were deeply affected and power of the Prime Minister was greatly magnified. These influenced the working of the Indian Federation. Congress parties in the states have quite frequently left the choice 'of the Chief Minister and to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and also to Rajiv Gandhi. In this period decisions regarding states were taken in New Delhi and there was significant collapse of the federal structure. Outcome of election result Since 1970s gave Indira Gandhi a profound victory. She changed party role and organisational design and it developed into an extremely centralised party. The institutions of cultural and informal federalism within the Congress destroyed and states became increasingly dependent upon the central Congress higher authority. Under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, Chief Ministers were nominated in New Delhi and then they elected unanimously by the Congress (I) in the State legislative parties. State-Congress (I) Chiefs are being replaced by Congress High Command. Ramakrishna Hedge, former Karnataka Chief Minister said: "As for the ruling party

it remains a praetorian guard of a single individual. Its programme reflects his changing whims. The Congress (I) simply does not exist as a political party. Chief Ministers are nominated in New Delhi. Of what avail are the constitutional provisions for federalism if the ruling state party itself is held in bondage by the centre?"¹⁶

Phase IV (1988-till date)

The first non-Congress government led by the Janata Party (1977-80) was marked the Coalition experiment at the Centre. The continuous struggles made by the opposition parties have created to form the Janata party to pull down the Congress from power. During the emergency (1975-77), certain opposition parties frustrated by the authoritarianism of the Congress, decided to fight the next general elections under a common banner to form an alternative to the Congress. Jayaprakash Narayan who provided moral leadership to Indian politics at that time initiated to form new political outfit as 'Janata Party' by, the Congress (O), the Jan Sangh, the Socialist Party and the Bharatiya Lok Dal to undertake the challenge against Congress. Morarji Desai wanted to promote the development of balance federalism. The Janata government was creating greater insecurity for the Chief Ministers. There were massive defections to the Janata Party in Tripura, Gujarat, Sikkim, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh; the governments in Goa and Mizoram resigned. Obviously it could not control the fallout effects of its electoral victory on state governments, nor could it avoid the effects of the Congress split (1978). In 1977 the Janata government dismissed nine Congress-ruled state assemblies (West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh) and placed them under Presidential rule in order to achieve the benefits of Janata electoral momentum. The argument of Janata government was that the assemblies had lost the confidence of the people, actually it was a clear case of the partisan use of Presidential rule.

The national Front Government

After the Janata Government the National Front under the leadership of V.P. Singh, the Defence Minister in Rajiv Gandhi's Cabinet took an attempt to form a non-Congress government at the centre in 1988. Singh's National Front government was an alliance among disparate individuals and parties to remain the Congress (I) out of power. The alliance began to fall apart because of the partisan interests and personality squabbles. V.P. Singh wanted to rise above factional politics, but he was encircled by ambitious colleagues and diehard parties whose conspiracies and intrigues to nudge him out of office tempered his style of governance. "The contradictory traits of his personality, exacerbated by situational imperatives, made him earnest and Machiavellian, decisive and ambivalent, consistent and inconsistent at one and the same time."¹⁷ His government began searching for pro-Janata Party hacks to fill these positions. To ensure value-based politics his government dismissed all state governors in January, 1990. Under the leadership of Prime Minister, P. V. N. Simha Rao, minority government was formed at the Centre in June 1991. On the one hand, the Rao government was successful in initiating economic reforms, 'it pursued liberalization and globalization much to the satisfaction of the World Bank- International Monetary Fund (IMP) combine,'¹⁸ side by side it failed to promote value-based politics. It sustained itself in power and made reasonable coalitions through buying support. The government like the previous Congress regimes was not hesitant to use president's rule for partisan purpose in the arena of federalism. Between 1991 and 1996, for a total of 11 incidents of president's rule, the Meghalaya Assembly (non-Congress government, 1991) was suspended, but 'revived after the Congress (I) was able to form the government'¹⁹, the Manipur Assembly (non-Congress, 1992; Congress I, 1994) was suspended twice, but 'revived in each case, after the Congress (I) formed the government.'²⁰ All cases of Presidential dissolutions involved non-Congress governments: Uttar Pradesh (1992, 1995); Nagaland (1992); Rajasthan (1992); Madhya Pradesh (1992); Bihar; (1995) Himachal Pradesh (1992).

The United Front Government

The next Lok Sabha election held in April-May 1996 and it was witnessed a severely fractured verdict with no one party or coalition being able to come anywhere near an absolute majority. It is a miracle that there was a government at the centre after the parliamentary polls as the situation with the party system in disarray and the political leadership in a worst ever crisis of credibility. Turmoil, besieged from within by disparate regional leaders from different political parties and from without by the Congress (I) and the Marxists, the 13-parties United Front government under the leadership of H.D. Deva Gowda muddles through-perhaps, until the Congress ditched it. The Front might have faltered in promoting its hastily drawn 'Common Minimum Programme' but it had stalled for some time, the saffronization of the centre much to the relief of minorities. Nobody knew how the political universe would unfold within the few months and years, but none anticipated realignment of political parties and leaders to provide stable situation in political arena. In that situation the centre seemed fragile and suffered from power deflation and it was obviously constrained the analysis of future itinerary of the political system and for the federal system in India.

The BJP-led Coalition

A rainbow coalition government was formed under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee (a combination of 17 parties and independents) and expect that the coalition would be more durable but this did not happen. He started his term as prime minister on 19 March 1998 and resigned on 17 April 1999 as his government lost a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha by a single vote. His government also blamed by some issues as for examples the BJP was “a cadre-based, it opted for a consensual ‘National Agenda for Governance’, somewhat monolithic party, and ideologically committed to the promotion of Hindutva etc.”²¹ The 13th Lok Sabha election held on October 1999 (somewhat delayed because of Kargil war) and the BJP-led omnibus alliance of 24 parties [the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)] got a comfortable working majority. ‘The electoral verdict was still fractured but the NDA did well; it got a majority of about 30 seats which enlivened its hope for a long stint in government under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee who was sworn in as prime minister (third time around) on 13th October 1999.’²² To keep the NDA together, policy of a National Agenda for Governance (NAG), sanitized for the BJP-allies, was drawn and the allies also cornered some key portfolios in the Union Cabinet. On assuming office, ‘Atal Behari Vajpayee promised bold economic reforms, fiscal discipline, and a review of the constitution for better governmental stability, functional decentralisation, judicial accountability, and financial autonomy though the President of India did not favour such a review.’²³ Except where the BJP's interests were at stake, the Vajpayee centre had been watchful but less intervening in the making and unmaking of state governments. He asserted that “his Government truly believed in Federalism and regional parties should have a say in the management of national affairs.”²⁴ As a dominant governing party at the centre, BJP entered into a variety of pre-poll and post-poll alliances to make its presence felt in all states. As a political party it used the resources of the Centre to capture non-BJP territories mainly if the state governments in these territories were well-entrenched and stable (e.g. most Southern States). Because of the politics of defections, States like Meghalaya, Manipur, Goa, and Pondicherry have had turnover of governments but the Vajpayee centre let the chips fall where they did. ‘Manipur came under President's rule (June 2001) as a last resort failing due consultation with Congress President, Sonia Gandhi.’²⁵ ‘Uttar Pradesh experienced a brief spell of presidential suspension of its legislative assembly following a divided mandate of the February 2002 polls.’²⁶

United Progressive Alliance

The fourteenth Lok Sabha elections (April/May 2004) brought a change in the central government, the BJP-led NDA government was replaced by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government. One of the most important feature of Manmohan Singh-led UPA is that in many state level based parties and groups which agreed to participate in the government, supported from outside by the Communist block of MPs. They have interpreted that their mandate is to promote and solidify the secular forces and transform Indian democracy with a view to bring comfort to millions of unemployed rural and urban youth and the neglected agrarian Indian. To improve the Centre-State relations, it was focused on growing regional imbalances, both among states as well as within states, through administrative, fiscal, investment and other means. The party believed that regional imbalances have been created by not just historical neglect, but also by distortions of resources and central government assistance. The Government will consider the creation of a Backward State and that basis they used to create productive assets in these states. The government used the National Development Council as more effective instrument of cooperative federalism. To strengthen the Centre-State relations, this government is committed to set-up a new commission keeping in view the sea-changes that have taken place in the polity and economy of India. The issue of centre-state relations was last looked at by the Sarkaria Commission over a decade ago.

The 15th Lok Sabha held in 2009 (between 16 April 2009 and 13 May 2009), the tenth coalition was also formed by UPA 2nd headed by Dr. Manmohan Singh as prime minister for 2nd term and also this elections chaired by Sonia Gandhi. The tenth coalition was able to get 262 seats — just short of 10 seats for a majority. The UPA 2nd was gotten unconditional supports from Samajwadi party with 23 MPs, Bahujan Samaj party with 21 MPs, Rashtrya Janta Dal with 4mps, Janta Dal secular with 3 mps, and the others. These all parties are supported to UPA 2nd as they wanted to keep out any possibility of a BJP government in the next 5 years. The tenth coalition was more often in the news headlines for 2G scam, coal mines scam, MGNREGA scam, common wealth games scam etc. After the TMC's demands of rollback of reforms including FDI in retail, increase in the price of diesel and limiting the number of subsidized cooking gas cylinders for households, the TMC Chief Mamta Banerjee, announced her decision to withdraw support to the UPA on 18 September 2012. Likewise the DMK withdrew support from UPA government over the issue of a draft resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council of the alleged human rights' violations of Sri Lankan Tamils on 19 March 2013.

The Third BJP-led Coalition 2014

The 16th Lok Sabha held in 2014 and the National Democratic Alliance won a sweeping victory, taking 336 seats and the BJP itself won 282 seats. After 1984, it is the first time in Indian General Election that a party has won enough seats to form the government without the support of other parties. The United Progressive Alliance, headed by Indian National Congress, won only 58 seats. This was the worst defeat in a general election of the United Progressive Alliance.

CONCUSSION

In Indian political system, coalition politics is a matter of fact. Today every citizen of Indian is bound to accept that era of coalition politics has now fully dawned. All the National parties are now fully realised the fact that none of them can singly get a majority at least in the near future. India's mother political party Congress which is in power at centre nearly 40 years also now fully aware of the fact that they need to form some sort of coalition group to occupy the power at the centre and states. The last few decades we are witnessed that how the hung parliaments become as permanent feature of the largest democracy with enduring impact. Now the billion dollar question stands that whether the feature of coalition politics is over in India or a new beginning of one-party dominant system by the BJP is now in place?

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