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Coalition Politics and Federalism in India

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Abstract

Coalition Politics is an essential feature of a multiparty government where several political parties join hands to run the government. It is a fact that today Coalition Politics has become a reality of the Indian Political System. Though the Indian Constitution has declared India as ‘a union of states’, instead of using the term ‘federation’ and the supremacy of the central government is noticed in different spheres of the Indian Federal System, in spite of that, the issue of liberty and autonomy of the states is also very important within the federal structure of India. From this viewpoint it can’t be denied that, a coalition system of government is more participatory in nature and it is also more responsive to regional concerns. In the sphere of centre-state relations within the federal structure of India, coalition politics can produce a cooperative-competitive approach which may increase the socio-economic and political growth and development of the nation. On the other hand, the main drawback of coalition government is its instability. In many cases, narrow personal interests hamper great national and regional interests in most of coalitions. Coalition politics may also bring about tension in the centre-state relations. Because on a few occasions, central directions are ignored by the coalition ministries in some of the states. This paper attempts to evaluate the impact of coalition politics or coalition government on Indian Federalism and to examine whether the coalition politics has strengthened the Indian federal system or it has weakened the Indian federal structure. In fact, the two main pillars on which the success of a coalition depends are cooperative attitude and collective responsibility and certainly a particular type of coalition government, which is based on these two pillars, may play an important role in strengthening the Indian Federal System.

Keywords: One-party dominance, Regional political parties, Coalition government, Instability, Autonomy, Cooperative federalism.

Article

Introduction: What is Coalition?

Coalition Politics is an essential feature of a multiparty government where several political parties join hands to run the government. **In the Encyclopaedia of Social Science, F. A. Ogg defines coalition in political sense as “a cooperative arrangement under which distinct political parties or at all events members of such parties unite to form a government or a ministry.”**

There can be two types of coalition governments --- pre-poll and post-poll. In a pre-poll coalition, several parties or groups contest elections on the basis of an agreed policies and programmes. If such a coalition group secures a majority of seats, it forms a government consisting of representatives from the parties joining the

coalition. A post-poll coalition is formed when no party is in a position to obtain absolute majority to run the government. In such a case, a coalition group or an alliance is formed to constitute a government.

Again, **Coalition Politics can be tactical.** In case of tactical coalition, there may be one party in power but certain other parties support the ruling party from outside.

For example: In 1979, when caretaker government of Charan Singh was functioning, Congress(I) gave support remaining outside the government. Therefore, **compromise or agreement is always the bedrock on which a coalition politics is built.**

One of the main advantages of a coalition government is that, it leads to broader representation, as the two parties have to compromise on their opposing ideologies in order to create policies that result in legislation. Greater policy scrutiny is also an important feature of coalition governments which could prove beneficial for the electorate as this should benefit a larger proportion of individuals than a single party government, as the two opposing parties reflect a broader spectrum of voters. In a coalition government, one party restrains other party from taking or passing controversial or undemocratic policies or laws.

On the other hand, **a main disadvantage of coalition government** is conflict within governance due to conflicting ideologies of the two parties, can make a government fractious. Therefore, compared to one party majority government, a coalition government is weak and unstable. In fact, coalition Politics is not a static but a dynamic affair as coalition partners may decide to disunite and form a new coalition, it implies a temporary conjunction of particular interests to enjoy some material reward or psychological advantage by seizing political power.

Coalition Politics in India:

The history of coalition politics in India can be traced to pre-independence period when in 1946 an Interim government with 14 representatives from Congress, Muslim League, Akali Dal etc. was formed. After independence, from 1952 to 1967 there was Congress party dominance and hence there was little possibility of emergence of coalition. After 1967 several regional political parties started playing prominent role in Indian politics and by 1969 the difficulty of forming a stable and majority party government was felt. Though at the national level, the first coalition government was formed in 1977, at the regional level coalition politics was experienced in West Bengal, Bihar and Punjab from 1967 onwards. In the recent time, at the central level, coalition government has been formed by NDA-I (1999-2004), UPA Phase-I (2004-2009), UPA Phase-II (2009-2014), and NDA-II (2014 onwards).

Following factors are responsible for the growth of Coalition Politics in India:

1. The roots of Coalition Politics may be found in the nature of Indian Politics. India had a long experience of **one dominant party rule**. While a single majority party rule provided political stability yet such a rule failed to satisfy the diverse demands and expectations of a vast heterogeneous population of India. This produced dissatisfaction among voters and as a result they started searching for alternative satisfactory arrangement. This helped to germinate the seeds of coalitions.
2. It's a fact that when one party rules for a considerable period and if the party is not ideologically strong, there develops rivalries. Dissatisfied members of the party leave the parent body and form splinter groups. As the **basic objectives of such splinter groups may not be different from those of the parent body**, the voters get confused and as a result no single party remains in a position to secure majority.

3. Initially, the basic purpose behind forming coalition of opposition groups was **to drive the Congress Party away from power** by any means. Because, the non-Congress political parties realized the fact that, in most states the combined strength of the major non-Congress parties can defeat Congress in 70–80 % of the electorates in which Congress has the support of only a relative majority of the voters and the united front tactic is the only one likely to be successful against Congress, for no major non-Congress party has ever been able to win a majority in any State Legislature on its own strength.

For example, the following table illustrates the fact:

Voting preferences in an electorate in West Bengal in 1967 and 1969

Jalpaiguri Electorate	1967 General Election	1969 Mid-term election
Electors enrolled	74,295	74,530
Total votes polled	52,278	52,488
Congress	21,978 (42.04%)	23,020 (43.85%)
Communists	15,029 (28.75%)	27,896 (53.15%)
Marxists	14,203 (27.17%)	(Both Communists & Marxists)
Independents	1,068 (2.04%)	1,572 (3.00%)
Totals	52,278 (100%)	52,488 (100%)

Jalpaiguri electorate in West Bengal was won by Congress in 1967 and by the Communist United Front candidate in 1969. However, the Congress party’s voting support rose from 42.04% in 1967 to 43.85% in 1969. Congress lost the seat in 1969 because the non-congress United Front parties were able to consolidate their votes behind a single candidate, and thus secure an absolute majority of votes (53.15%) in the constituency. In fact, it had already happened in the states of Kerala, Madras and Orissa in which anti-Congress United Fronts were formed in 1967.

4. Dynamism of Indian society with its hierarchical class and caste structure, rural-urban dichotomy, uneven developmental performance and social cleavages like language and religion create differences of outlook regarding the ability of a particular political party. Naturally, many political parties compete for attracting voters and this may result in **divisions of votes** making a single majority party difficult to emerge.
5. Besides, the Indian Political System suffers from a **crisis of leadership**. It’s a fact that after independence the quality of leaders declined tremendously though the quantity increased substantially and this factor has played a major role in the development of coalition government in India.

Myron Weiner observes that mushroom growth of state (regional) political parties resulting in coalitions gradually have impact on the formation of national governments as well as on the federal structure of India.

Nature of Indian Federalism:

Although, the Constitution of India has nowhere used the term “federal” but “Union of States”, it has provided for a structure of governance which is essentially federal in nature. Within the basic framework of

federalism, the Constitution has given overriding powers to the Central government. The objective of the Constitution makers was to have a Cooperative Federalism. However, it is observed that national parties tend to lead to centralization of powers. Since independence, for four decades, India was under one-party dominant system, which was seen as a unitary government. But it's a fact that, the emergence of regional political parties has contributed greatly to the breakdown of one-party dominant system at the centre and has played a conducive role in strengthening the process of decentralization of power. The regional political parties have placed the state in a vital position of Indian Politics and also been playing major role at the national policies and further federalized the working of Indian Federalism. Hence, during the coalition era of Indian Politics, the role of regional political parties within coalition government has a major impact on federal system of India.

Impact of Coalition Politics on Indian Federalism:

In Indian Political System, Coalition Politics is a matter of fact. If we analyze the impact of coalition politics on Indian Federalism, we shall realize that, in some cases, the Indian Federal System has been strengthened as well as weakened by the coalition government in India. In fact, the Indian Party System has gone through a different phases from One Party Dominance to Multi Party system. It has different phases like 1952-67, 1967-77, 1977-89 and 1989 onwards.

1952-1967:

It had been found that whenever power was centralized in the hands of one dominant party (Congress) at the centre which was known as one party dominance phase, the nature of Indian Federalism was considered to be a Centralized Federation. Where, non-congress parties in different states had loud voices against the Centre and thus, the nature of centre-state relations in India had been determined or influenced mostly by this factor.

1967-1977:

In the second phase of Indian party system, when non-congress governments were established in several states, the demand for state autonomy was also very strong. The declaration of national emergency in June 1975 affected the position of Congress party and in the election held in 1977, it lost its majority and the newly formed Janta party, a constituent of many parties, formed a coalition government.

1977-1989:

But it was unable to unite all the constituent parties for long and in the next election held in 1980, the Congress party secured majority which continued up to 1989. During internal national emergency period 1975-77, Indian Federation was totally converted into unitary form and democracy to dictatorship. Because of its reactions the dominant Congress party was overthrown by the newly formed coalition government of Janta party. Non-congress national or regional political parties had come to power when coalition partners also overthrown congress from number of federative units. But coalition government of Janta party could not survive for a long. Ultimately, the earlier dominant party Congress recaptured the power at centre and in number of states too. As a result, the possibility of representation of the regional or state political parties had been reduced in the federal government of India. Because of the demand for state autonomy and for strong state strong centre a Sarkaria Commission was constituted in April 1983 to examine the centre-state relations in India.

1989 onwards:

But, in the next phase of 1989 onwards the nature of Indian party system changed from one party dominance to a multi party system. A coalition government of Janata Dal came into power overthrowing the Congress out of power

in 1989 Lok Sabha election. After 1989 and till date the central has been governed by coalition governments. This transition from one party dominant system, in which the central government functioned largely in accordance with the Constitution providing for a strong centre, to a coalition government in which regional aspirations had to be satisfied, affected the very nature of the federal government in India. In states also, the rule of the Congress party gave way to the rule by coalition of parties. However, while in some states, e.g. West Bengal and Kerala, the coalition politics gave stability to government, but in a number of states, it was marked by instability inviting central interventions frequently.

In fact, **after 1989 phase** which is known as Coalition phase or Multi Party System phase, **no national political party could capture power or obtain majority in Lok Sabha alone**. Each time a number of political parties or a blend of national and regional political parties formed the government at Centre.

For example: The first three coalition governments at the national level, --- the National Front under V.P. Singh in 1989 and two United Fronts led by H. D. Deve Gowda in 1996 and I.K. Gujral in 1997 that were led by Janta Dal proved short lived due to internal problems and absence of adequate institutional mechanisms. As a consequence, these coalition governments suffered from instability which affected the smooth functioning of federal system of India.

After the failure of Janta Dal two broad fronts or major alliances came into existence after 1997, --- the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by BJP with the support of some regional parties and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress party. As it was generally believed that coalition governments had come to stay, these two broad-based national coalitions, --- NDA and UPA, learning from past experiences, developed certain institutional frameworks for coordination among coalition partners and a suitable mechanism between the Prime Minister and leaders of main supporting parties. Working within such institutional framework, both NDA-I (1999-2004) and UPA phase-I (2004-09) & phase-II (2009-14) have been able to govern the country for full terms, which has provided stability to the Central government in the federal system of India.

In the 2014, 16th Lok Sabha Elections, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the BJP, won a sweeping victory, taking 336 seats, the BJP self winning 282 seats. It is the first since the 1984 Indian General Elections that a party has won enough seats to form the government without the support of other parties. In this election, UPA won 60 seats and the regional political parties succeeded in securing more than hundred seats.

But, in the Parliamentary Election of 2014, the national or regional political parties those who are not the part of two main alliances of NDA or UPA, have formed the Third Front. Some political parties like CPI, CPM, BSP, Samajwadi Party, Trinamool Congress, Janata Dal United are trying to weigh their weight. During this era, those regional political parties like Shiromani Akali Dal, National Conference, DMK, Telgu Desam, Assam Gana Parishad, Lok Dal etc. are partners of the coalition government at centre as well as ruling their respective state are the strategic partners of NDA or UPA or Third Front. As a result, the loud voices demanding for state autonomy are weakening in these days. However, We still hear some voices from those states where other opposition parties have come to power other than the ruling alliance at centre. **For example:** if Shiromani Akali Dal was ruling Punjab States and also a partner of ruling NDA at centre, it had no allegations of victimizations of centre. If there was UPA government at centre, it had numerous issues of victimizations.

It seems that the problems of centre-state relations or state autonomy issues are resolved to its maximum extent with the establishment of coalition era. The reasons we realize that national political parties are weakening in the era of coalition politics. The other reason is that if a regional political party is the partner of ruling alliance of federal government to whom it can blame? With the formation of national alliances the regional political parties have a strong counter voice because of the support of alliance partners. Ruling alliance cannot dare to victimize one state or other. Thus, **the development of regional political parties and coalition politics, both at the central and state levels, helped to develop a participatory political culture which influenced inevitably the federal process in India.** These developments successfully checked arbitrary actions of one-party dominant rule on the one hand and provided a source of strength to cooperative atmosphere between the centre and states in India.

However, **this is not to say that actions of regional political parties were always justified** but their influence on the federal process was evident. **So, we should also analyze the political costs of this development of coalition politics in context to Indian Federalism.** Its major political cost was political instability in transitional phase where the coalition governments could not survive which was intended for a long time. The prevailing coalition era is also known for lack of firmed decisions because of the problems of creation of consensus amongst the coalition partners. Similarly, the reverse problem also arised where the major alliance partner/s sometimes did not bother about the sentiments or demands of other alliance partners.

In context to the relationship between the coalition politics and federalism in India, a recent example may be referred to here. The **present coalition government (NDA-II) at the centre has replaced the Planning Commission of India by constituting a new commission named National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog on January 1, 2015.** The Prime Minister will be the chairman of the Aayog and the Chief Ministers of all the states and the Lt. Governors of the Union Territories will be the members of this Aayog. There was no scope for participation of the states in the former Planning Commission and hence it was mainly a central institution dominated by the central government. But we may hope that **as there is a provision for participation of the states in the overall development planning process of the country through this Aayog, the opinions or the demands of the states will get importance, which will strengthen the federal system of India.**

At the state level, coalition politics left an impact on the office of the Chief Minister. **In most of the cases, the position of Chief Minister was undermined as a result of political opportunism and a game of politics by power-hungry and unscrupulous politicians.** Coalitions at the state levels in India have also resulted in the creation of new activist role for the power-loving ambitious Governors. Incidentally, coalitions revealed Governor-Chief Minister clashes in many cases. Again, **coalition politics brought about tension in the centre-state relations. Because, on a few occasions, central directions were ignored by the coalition ministries in some of the states like West Bengal and Kerala.**

Critical Evaluation:

However, what so ever the gains and losses of the prevailing coalition era, it can't be denied that, the Indian Federalism got strengthen in a big way. Because, it is through coalitions, that the views, demands and problems of various sections of society are brought into limelight. Different sections of society can find satisfactory representations through coalitions. It is also true that coalitions provide opportunities for mutual adjustments of

conflicting attitudes. A coalition system of government is more participatory in nature and it is more responsive to regional concerns. In the sphere of centre-state relations within the federal structure of India, coalition politics may produce a cooperative-competitive approach which may increase the socio-economic political growth and development of the nation. Above all, it can bring relief from the autocratic and dominant monopoly of any single political party.

On the other hand, the greatest drawback of coalition government is its instability. Lack of integrity and absence of collaborative and ideological affinity are two main reasons behind this instability. Such political instability adversely affected the developmental works and democratic functioning of the Indian Federal Political System. In many cases, narrow personal interests hamper great national and regional interests in most of coalitions.

Indeed, the two main pillars on which the success of a coalition depends are cooperative attitude and collective responsibility and certainly a particular type of coalition government, which is based on these two pillars, may play an important or significant role in strengthening the Indian Federal System.

It is a fact that coalition politics has become a reality of the Indian Political System. 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 context. All the national political parties are now fully realized the fact that none of them can singly get a majority to form a government and they need to form some sort of coalition group to occupy the power at the centre and states.

Actually, the relationships between the national and regional political parties are largely dependent on the functions of the members of the parties at the central and regional levels establish with each other. Therefore, the intra-party relationship assumes more importance for the development and smooth functioning of the federal system of India 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 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.”* He also observed that *“centralizing and decentralizing 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.”* 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. Therefore, the formation of coalition government and its influence on federal system or structure of India are two major issues in Indian Political System.

This paper has tried to show that the rise of regional political parties and the emergence of coalition politics or coalition government in India have contributed to the break-down of the one-party dominance at the centre. The new role of regional political parties through coalition politics (coalition government) has transformed Indian Federalism significantly and that's why since 1990's the states have been able to hold an important position in Indian politics. **The regional political parties came to play major role at the national level and also the key players in**

coalition government. This kind of change in the party system of India, by coalition politics, reflects the drastic change in politics of federalism, shifting from dominant federalism to cooperative federalism.

Conclusion

Thus, from this analysis of the impact of coalition politics on Indian Federalism, it may be concluded that today coalition government plays a significant and inevitable role in Indian politics and it is reflecting the Indian democracy as well as the federal character of the nation. The successful completion of coalition governments NDA-I, UPA-I and II and today NDA-II guarantees not only the decline of one-party rule but also the rise of regional political parties. India now looks forward to a stable future of coalition governments, as single party majority seem to be a thing of the past now.

As all we know that, at a certain time in the past, coalition government was introduced to break-down the one-party (Congress) dominant system, in this context, therefore, a question may be raised here that,

Is there a tendency to start a new era of one-party (BJP) dominant system at present, by using the coalition government as an instrument?

Indeed, it must be the responsibility of each and every political party irrespective of national or regional, whether it is within coalition government system or one-party dominant system, to think towards not only the power, but also to preserve national security and development and to strengthen the Indian Federal System.

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