

Impact of Coalition Politics on Indian Democracy

Abstract

The paper wants to highlight the impact of coalition governments in India. The evaluation of coalition politics and an analysis of how far coalition remains dynamic yet stable. There has taken place a paradigm shift in Indian democracy as a result of the conversion of its dominant one party system into a bi polar multi-party system. Its logical outcome has been the beginning of the era of coalition politics. More often coalitions are formed to prevent a common enemy from the government and capturing the power. Equally interesting is the fact a coalition devoid of ideological moorings survives till the enemy is humbled. While making political adjustments, principles may have to be set aside and in this process ideology becomes the first victim. Under the coalition governments, no single party could take any unilateral decision without being questioned by the other partners in the coalition. It is part of the 'coalition dharma' that there should be periodical consultations among the constituent parties before taking any decision concerning important problems/issues facing the country.

Keywords: India, Government, Coalition, Ideology, Impact, Stable, Alliance, Parliamentary Democracy, Elections, Lok Sabha, Party, Politics, Positive, Negative, National.

Introduction

Coalition is a phenomenon of a multi-party government where a number of minority parties join hands for the purpose of running the government which is otherwise not possible. A coalition is formed when many groups come into common terms with each other and define a common programme or agenda on which they work. A coalition government always remains in pulls and pressures particularly in a multinational country like India. We had a short lived BJP-led coalition government in power under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee after these elections. It was followed by the united front governments headed by H.D.Devagowda and Inder Kumar Gujral respectively. The NDA government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee came to power after the 1998 and the 1999 parliamentary elections and after that Dr Man Mohan Singh led UPA government assumed office after the 2004 parliamentary elections, which has again been voted to power in the 2009 parliamentary elections. An overview of the working of these coalition governments shows that these have been both functional and dysfunctional for the Indian democracy. An attempt is being made in this brief sub-chapter to identify the positive and negative impacts of the phenomenon of coalition politics on Indian democracy.

Aim of the Study

1. To study the need of coalition governments in India.
2. To study the impact of coalition governments in India.
3. To study the role of regional political parties in coalition governments in India.
4. To study the comparison of coalition governments with other governments in India.

Positive Impact

One of the most important positive aspect of the coalition governments that have worked in India during the past one and half decades is that they very distinctively and conspicuously maintained democratic semblance in the policy making and governing processes. Respect for freedom of press, tolerance of dissent and promotion of consensus or common approach to important issues have received due attention during the coalition regimes. Pluralist approach and federal spirit came to the fore under the coalition dispensations right from 1989 till to date.¹ If we look at the history of the coalition politics from 1989 to 2009,

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we can identify certain political developments which have had a positive impact on the Indian democracy. Some of these are as;

1. First positive aspect of the coalition politics has been that it has promoted federalism in India. Decentralization of powers has been the hallmark of all the coalitions' governments which have ruled at the national level since 1996. During the one party congress rule, the state governments were treated like the municipalities and their chief minister like the nominees or the appointees of the central government. But during the coalition governments, a new sense of importance and independent identity has developed in state. These have now become capable of ussing various issues with the central government with new confidence.. Coalition has the advantage of promoting the politics of consensus on issues of national importance. Coalition system has brought some sort of decentralized approach to the governance at the national level even under the BJP led national democratic alliance rule, in spite of the fact that some of the BJP leaders and the Sang Parivar tried to impose their ideology and will on the government. BJP under the NDA rule had to dilute its own philosophy of Hindutva and the majoritarian approach for the sake of sharing power with its allies.²
2. The regional issues which were being either totally ignored or were being given scant attention in parliament, started getting due recognition and importance in the era of coalition politics. The issues like economic, social, and cultural deprivation of various regions of the country and the problem of natural calamities in various regions of the country are now being often raised and discussed in parliament. The social and political aspirations of the people of various states are also being given due difference in the formulations of the plans and policies of the country. This has logically led to the development of a politics of compromise, conciliation and consensus in the Indian democracy. Under the coalition governments the Indian democracy appears to have been made safe as use or misuse of Article 356 has been restricted. The general tendency to use it to pull down the state governments controlled by the political opponents has been checked. It is evident from the fact that when the BJP-led coalition tried to invoke Article 356 in Bihar in september 1998 and march 1999, it could not muster the requisite support in the Rajya Sabha.³
3. The decline and disintegration of national parties like the congress and the Janata Dal has contributed to proliferation of regional parties like Lok Jan Shakti Party, Biju Janata Dal, Trinamool Congress, NCP etc. their role in the process of government formation at the center has been increased. This political clout of their political leaders has increased their importance. So much so that they are regarded as the king makers at national level. Chandra Babu Naidu from Andhra

Pradesh, Jaya Lalita and Karunanidhi from Tamil Nadu, Lalu Prasad Yadav and Ram Bilas Paswan from Bihar, Mamta Banerjee from West Bengal are some of the regional leaders who have begun to be reckoned a new power centers in the emerging configurations of the national politics. Though on a different plane Jyoti Basu, Prakash Karat, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayavati were also able to attain the status of power centers because of the strength and importance of their respective parties at the national levels. This phenomenon of the rise of new power centers definitely had a sobering effect on the national politics. It has led to the evolution of a multilateral and pluralistic system of decision making in Indian democracy.⁴

4. Some healthy conventions and traditions have also been developed after the emergence of coalition politics. The presidents have begun to strictly follow the practice of inviting the largest party for forming the government. This was done in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004. Another healthy convention that has developed during this era is that coalition politics has been functioning constitutionally in the position and character of a Care Taker Government. This is evident from the fact that such a government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee not only fought Kargil war but also imposed taxes like a regular government. Now it has been accepted that a Care Taker Government suffers from no limitations and can face any emergency like a regular government. Some of the new practices and conventions that developed during the coalition era have, as a matter of fact, changed the role and status of constitutional posts such as that of the President, the Governor and the Prime Minister etc. Some more conventions, like the Common Minimum Programme, the co-ordination committee, national advisory council, etc have been developed during the coalition era for running the government successfully. These have changed the nature of parliamentary democracy. There has now emerged a new model after the 2004 parliamentary elections in which the Prime Minister looks after the administrative matters whereas the party president, Sonia Gandhi is looking after political affairs.⁵
5. One of the major beneficiaries of the emerging coalition system in India has been the Bharatiya Janata party, the leading party in the NDA. There was a time when it was being considered to be a political untouchable at the national level. But the BJP slowly gained some extent of acceptability. Several regional and national parties including the Muslim dominated national conference and the Sikh dominated Akali Dal became partners in NDA. Ultimately, the BJP has been able to come out from the stigma of Hindu fundamentalism.⁶
6. The coalition has promoted federalism and respect for the constitution as hasty and undesirable amendments to the constitution have been avoided under these regimes. Most of amendments to the constitution have taken place

during the single party regimes upto late 1980s. It goes to the credit of the coalition government under the National Front in 1990s to have revived the institution of inter-state council to discuss the issues related to centre-state relations periodically. The meetings of inter-state council were held under successive coalition government led by NDA under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee and UPA under the leadership of Manmohan Singh. Thus one of the fundamental pillars of the parliamentary democracy, i.e., the constitution is safe under the coalition governments.⁷

7. The regional issues which were either ignored totally or given scant attention in the parliament or in the national governance started getting due recognition and importance, thanks to the growing political power of the regional groups of the national parties or the regional political parties. It has become apparent that the regional distribution of support has become crucial in an era of multi-party governing coalitions. In Lok Sabha elections, 1999, BJP was able to form solid alliances with regional players. This tactic enabled the BJP to govern a full term of office while leading an unwieldy multi-party coalition. In Lok Sabha elections, 2004, not all regional allies of the BJP fared well. Some regional allies of BJP were victim to the sentiment of ant incumbency that guided many Indian voters. The hitherto neglected areas of the country are getting more attention and more resources under the coalition system dominated by the regional political parties, thus giving a true federal shape to the Indian polity.⁸

Negative Impact

The coalition governments at the national level in India have also created several negative side effects. The coalition politics in India could not control the political corruption, which started in the early 1970s and continued to grow through the past three decades. Almost all the regional and smaller national political parties which became partners in the power sharing at the national level are using their position to earn money through questionable sources. It is to be noted here that no progress –social, economic or any type can be achieved unless there is a stable government having stable policies.⁹ This negative side-effect of coalition politics can be described as below:

1. There is a general complaint that under the coalition governments, the political system of the country is getting fragmented and is leading to anarchy. Though, the fear of fragmentation or anarchy is unwarranted and necessary, as the system of coalition generally has an inbuilt check against any threat of authoritarianism and has a sobering effect on the impetuous nature of some of the partners. The emergence of the concept of outside support in the formation of minority government cannot be regarded as a healthy convention. The untimely death of the governments led by Devegowda, I.K.Gujral and Atal Bihari Vajpayee happened due to the sudden

withdrawal of the outside support. This fact cannot be denied that the phenomenon of outside support does not have a good record in our parliamentary history, although it has emerged as a significant factor in the era of coalition politics. The government under Manmohan Singh (2004-2009) survived on the outside support of left parties and then of the Samajwadi party after the withdrawal of support by the leftist parties on the issue of Nuclear Deal. It had to face the problem of resistance on the issue of economic reforms ad Nuclear Deal during its honeymoon with the leftist front. Later on it was pressurized to satisfy the demands of the Samajwadi party and the J.M.M. whose support had enabled it to survive and gain the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha on July22, 2008.¹⁰

2. The growth of extra-constitutional centers of power during coalition era like R.S.S. during A.B.Vajpayee period and the chairperson of the National Advisory Council during Manmohan Singh period (2004 onwards) led to the weakening of position of Prime Minister. This process had started in 1996, when Devegowda had to appoint the nominees of the coalition parties as ministers without questioning and continued during the era of Gujral and Vajpayee. Even in the present coalition, the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is being projected by his critics as a dignified proxy of Sonia Gandhi without enjoying the right to appoint or remove members of either the Prime Minister's office or the Council of Ministers. The superior position of Sonia Gandhi is being forward upon by her critics as de-facto Prime Ministership and super Prime Ministership. Again, Sri Manmohan Singh has to work under supervision of Sonia Gandhi, is said to be super Prime Minister. She is the real power behind the throne. As a UPA chairperson it is she who manages the coalition. So the job of PM is to run the government but not to sustain the government.¹¹ This emergence of extra-constitutional centers of power has added a new dimension to the Indian democracy.
3. The rise of new constitutional practices and institutions like the Co-ordination Committee and the National Advisory Council has also eroded the authority of the Council of Ministers. Most of the principles on which parliamentary democracy functions such as the leadership of the Prime Minister, a compact council of ministers and the collective responsibility to parliament have been, as result, undermined. Many a time the decisions taken by the Council of Ministers have been changed under pressure from various coalition partners. The change in the government stand on the disinvestment in public sector undertakings, economic reforms, appointment of tainted person as ministers and the recent setu-sumenduram issue are some of the examples in this context. The coalition politics also seems to be heading to an era of confrontation between the constitutional authorities.

4. Coalition politics has been born in India due to a negative approach to politics. The United Front coalition was formed in 1996 for preventing the BJP from acquiring power. The NDA came into existence in 1998 for blocking the Congress (I) and Leftist Parties. Even the UPA was born in 2004 on an Anti- NDA plank. There have also emerged some other unhealthy trends in Indian politics such as political vendetta, misuse of investigative agencies and opening and closing of criminal cases against political leaders. The sting operations, political black mailing, naming and renaming of schemes and institutions and reversing decisions taken by the former governments are also used for political gains.¹²
5. The sad truth of coalition politics is that none of the political parties except the BJP and the communists have been organized around some ideology. They revolve around the personalities and family dynasties of some leaders. It is a well known fact that the National Conference and P.D.P (Jammu and Kashmir), Akali Dal (Punjab), Indian National Lok Dal (Haryana), Samajwadi party and Bahujan Samaj party (U.P), D.M.K. and AIDMK (Tamil Nadu), TDP (Andhra Pradesh), RJD and Lok Jan Shakti party (Bihar), BJD (Orissa), Shiv Sena and NCP (Maharashtra), JDS (Karnataka) etc, are being run by a single leader and have become a family business. In nearly every case, there is no inner party democracy. New leaders never emerge from their ranks. Success and succession are decided only by birth. We may even say that in every party collective leadership has been degenerated into individual leadership.¹³
6. Generally the coalitions come into existence and function on the bases of Common Minimum Programme. This puts a constraint on the policies of the government. It has been happening because there is lack of consensus on the long term objectives of the country. The cases of controversy over Nuclear Agreement between India and U.S.A. among the political parties may be cited by way of illustration. In other words, the polity under the coalition system suffers from the lack of a long –term vision. Thus the state becomes a 'demand polity' as the Rudolfs call it. Therefore the coalition government are prone to adopt the controversial policies or programmes for the sake of survival of the government.¹⁴

Every government elected since 1989 has been a coalition of multiple parties. This will be the case for the foreseeable future, given that neither of the two national parties is currently strong enough to form a government on its own. Presently, all the mainstream political parties in India have accepted coalition as a fact of life in Indian politics. As the coalition involves many smaller and larger parties and independents from among various states or the consensual decisions on various issues enriches not only the balanced development of the states but also strengthens the federal system. The coalition governments have, thus not only diluted the authoritarianism of a single party but also encouraged

multilateralism and decentralized the consensus on various issues and decisions is now possible in the favour of a 'Common man' (Aam Admi). The historic legislations like 'Right to Information Act' and 'National Employment Guarantee Programme' made by UPA government on the subjects concerned with the common man could be possible due to coalition government at the centre.

Conclusion

India finally seems to have made a perennial entry in the world of coalitions. One of the most important positive aspect of the coalition governments that have worked in India during the past one and half decades is that they very distinctively and conspicuously maintained democratic semblance in the policy making and governing processes. First positive aspect of the coalition politics has been that it has promoted federalism in India. The regional issues which were being either totally ignored or were being given scant attention in parliament, started getting due recognition and importance in the era of coalition politics. The decline and disintegration of national parties like the Congress and the Janata Dal has contributed to proliferation of regional parties like Lok Jan Shakti Party, Biju Janata Dal etc. The coalition governments at the national level in India have also created several negative side effects. The coalition politics in India, could not control the political corruption, which started in the early 1970s and continued to grow through the past three decades. . There is a general complaint that under the coalition governments, the political system of the country is getting fragmented and is leading to anarchy. The rise of new constitutional practices and institutions like the Co-ordination Committee and the National Advisory Council has also eroded the authority of the Council of Ministers. Coalition politics has been born in India due to a negative approach to politics. The United Front coalition was formed in 1996 for preventing the BJP from acquiring power. The NDA came into existence in 1998 for blocking the Congress (I) and Leftist Parties. Even the UPA was born in 2004 on an Anti-NDA plank.

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