

COALITION POLITICS IN INDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF EMERGING TRENDS SINCE 1989 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Dr. Rajshree DUTTA

Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Social Science, Fakir Mohan University
rajshree.dutta@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Party System in India is unique both in its nature and dynamics. For a long period of time the history of Indian politics has been characterised by one dominant party system with Indian National Congress (INC) playing the pivotal role at the centre stage. The complexities and pluralities in the Indian politics led to the development of full-fledged political parties. Since 1989, there has been fractured mandate leading to the development of party coalitions in India. There has been an end to the era of single party governments both at the national level as well as at the level of several states. Therefore, drawing on the secondary sources, the objective of this paper is to analyse the positive and negative impacts of coalition on Indian politics. The paper would also delineate the different phases of party coalitions at the national level between 1989-2019.

Keywords: Coalition, Political Parties, Party System, Indian Politics, Elections

Introduction

Coalitions have become a norm for India characterised by multi-party system. A set of determined people/political parties combine to govern for personal or party ends. The experts are of the view that the age of the coalition politics is here to stay under which several political parties are simultaneously sharing power both at the national level as well as at the level of several states. The regional political parties are day by day gaining significance and there has been end of the single party days, there is no escape from coalition politics. Further, the rise of regional parties and their strategy to gain national importance in different states has resulted in coalition politics¹.

Objectives and Methodology

The study basically deals with two objectives: firstly, to analyse the positive and negative impacts of coalition on Indian politics. Secondly, to delineate the different phases of party coalitions at the national level between 1989-2019.

The present study is based on aggregate data analysis relating general elections in India between 1989-2019. Data needed for the analysis has been taken from the Election Commission of India (i.e. the electoral data).

Coalition Politics at the National Level

The growing importance of the regional parties is related to their success in giving voice to the interests of the backward castes, dalits, tribals, women, minorities etc.

Geographically, the regional parties are regional, but they tend to be national in terms of issues which are significant to the country as a whole. Their presence is an indication of a more competitive and polarised party system. The decline of one party rule and the rise of the regional parties are confirmed by their active role in the continuity of coalition governments like National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The culture of party politics to be led by a single majority party with a charismatic personality has become discoloured. Thus the era of coalition government has given both positive and negative impacts according to Arora (2002); Roy (2004); and Sridharan (2008). Table 1 presents party coalitions at the national level between 1989-2019.

From the table 1, it is found that from 1989 onwards, it is difficult to think about Indian party politics with a single party winning majority of seats in the Lok Sabha. This has resulted in fractured verdicts and formation of minority or coalition government. This period stands different from the period when Indian National Congress won single-handedly and formed majority governments between 1952-1984. In 1977², the INC lost to Janata Party (JP) for the first time. The Janata Party alliance was the combinations of five main parties the INC (Organisation), the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD), the Congress for Democracy (CFD) and the Socialist Party to build an all India alternative to the INC. Other supporting parties were Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM). But the Janata Alliance did not last for long and it disintegrated into separate parties by the end of 1979.

Table 1: Party Coalitions in India, 1989-2019

Election Year	Party Coalitions
1989	JD ⁺
1996	JD ⁺
1998	BJP ⁺
1999	BJP ⁺
2004	INC ⁺
2009	INC ⁺
2014	BJP ⁺
2019	BJP ⁺

Source: http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx, retrieved on 21st March, 2021.

The process of alliance formation got an enhancement with the formation of Janata Dal (JD) in 1989. Under the leadership of V.P Singh, the JD gave one-to-one opposition to INC. The formation of JD government in 1989 was also a landmark since it revived the concept of a coalition as a feasible alternative. There were two features of the alliance: first, a formal pre-electoral coalition was formed comprising the National Front (the JD, the two Lok Dals and the JP), three regional parties: Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Congress (Socialist). The second level was related more to informal seat adjustment between the National Front and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the one hand and the Left parties, on the other, even though they were ideologically incompatible (Chakrabarty, 2006).

The 1989 National Front made way to start afresh coalition for India. It was different from the JP alliance of 1977-79 because it aimed to combine different parties based on common manifesto. The regional parties and the Left were accommodated into the coalition. An adjustment with the seats was also the target as was done for the first time against INC by the JP government. However, its collapse was due to the growing distance between the BJP and other National Front partners, which finally resulted in the withdrawal of BJP support to the government (Sridharan, 2003).

Experts had already predicted the change from INC in 1984 to JD government in 1989. In 1977, when the INC for the first time lost to JP, it had secured 154 seats and 35% votes than in 1989, when INC secured 197 seats and 40% votes. The shift in the electoral support was more in 1977 than in 1989 elections. However, the JD government could not last long and at the end of 1990, V.P Singh was replaced by the caretaker Prime Minister Chandrasekhar till June 1991.

The constituents units of National Front fought the 1991 elections. With the victory of INC in the 1991 elections, the JD government remained quiescent. The INC was back to power and the reason stated behind this was the sympathy wave created due to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi during the process of election. In 1991 elections, the contest was between the National Front confronting the BJP as well as the INC. The INC was able to form a single-party minority government with the external support from parties like All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). By 1991, the BJP proved insufficient to win a national majority. However, after 1991, the INC fell apart due to its failure to amalgamate regional partners. This created the space for the emergence of many independents and regional parties attempting to form small alliances among themselves (Carroll, 2008).

The year 1996-1999 was characterized as a period of turmoil, where we mark several short-lived alliances. The party system appeared to be stable which may be due to the development of a bi-nodal framework led by INC and BJP. These two dominant multi-state parties formed the two nodes of the political system. Even today, the INC and the BJP are the two dominant multi-state parties in the country. For a long period of time, the INC was the only multi-state polity-wide party and it was only in 1996, that the BJP joined in this category. The share of INC and BJP taken together has almost remained constant with a very little variation. The share of other multi-state parties has showed a greater variation. It is also noticed that the share of single-state parties and Independents has gradually increased over the years (Arora and Kailash, 2011).

In the mid 1990s, gathering from the past experience, there was the realisation that a combination of national and regional parties was the necessary requirement to form a stable coalition at the centre. In 1996, the National Front-Left Front coalition was formed. The JD coalition was somewhat comparable to 1989 National Front. The key partners of the coalition were the JD, the Samajwadi Party (SP), CPI, CPM, Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP). In the 1996 elections, the BJP won the largest number of seats i.e. 161 seats. However, the secular opposition parties gave a serious opposition to the BJP to prevent the formation of a Hindu nationalist government. As a result the BJP government was forced to resign by remaining in power only for 13 days. The United Front (UF) was formed, which was a coalition of 14 secular and regional parties like JD, SP, CPI, CPM, RSP, Forward Bloc, Tamil Manila Congress (TMC), DMK, TDP, AGP, All India Indira Congress (Tiwari), Karnataka Congress Party (KCP) and the Madhya Pradesh Vikas Congress (MPVC) to replace the BJP. The outside support was provided by INC (Hardgrave and Kochanek, 2008). The problem that cropped up was that the INC was the prime political adversary of many of the coalition partners of UF. This made the INC intrinsically 'uncoalitionable'. The 1998 elections was the result of INC withdrawing its support in 1997 (Sridharan, 2003).

In 1998, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA-I) led by the BJP was formed along with other 13 parties i.e. AIADMK, Pattali Makal Katchi (PMK), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS), Samata Party of Bihar; Samata Party of Uttar Pradesh; Biju Janata Dal (BJD) of Odisha; Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) of Punjab; Tamil Mannila Congress (TMC) of West Bengal; Shiv Sena (SHS) of Maharashtra; Lok Shakti of Karnataka; and Haryana Vikas Parishad (HVP) of Haryana. The post-poll allies consisted of Arunachal Congress (ARC) of Arunachal Pradesh; Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) of Sikkim; and TDP of Andhra Pradesh.

Independents from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Assam and Anglo-Indians from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka were also included (Pai, 1998). The result saw the improvement of both seat and vote shares of BJP.

Two features which were noticed in the 1998 election were: first, despite emerging as the largest party single-handedly, the BJP and its allies replaced the United Front (UF) coalition only with another coalition with a short term. Second, several regional parties emerged and determined to a great extent the shape of the national party system. The NDA-I lost one of its key ally i.e. AIADMK and new elections were called. This time, the BJP placed even greater emphasis on establishing a feasible pre-electoral coalition which would be capable of achieving majority in the coming elections.

In 1999 general elections, the NDA-II led by BJP made its base stronger by bringing together 24 regional parties like TDP, Janata Dal United (JDU), SAD, DMK, PMK, MDMK, BJD, SHS, HVP, Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), SDF, Mizo National Front (MNF), Manipur State Congress Party (MSCP), Samata Party (SAP), Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), Lok Shakti and including splinters from INC. The 1999 elections marked political stability in India after having a long period of electoral volatility with the victory of BJP-led coalition. The first non-Congress government was the BJP-led coalition to continue to exist a full five year term. According to Lefebvre and Cyril (2009), the formation of the BJP-led NDA was the milestone as it formed a stable coalition including both national and regional parties. The NDA even strengthened the federal character of the Indian polity.

Pre-electoral coalition comprising of 17 parties was the strategy of INC for the 2004 elections. This period marked a sudden halt of the BJP as was suffered by INC under Indira's Gandhi leadership in 1977. The United Progressive Alliance-I (UPA-I) led by INC defeated NDA-II. The other members in the UPA-I coalition were MDMK, PMK, DMK (these three parties moved from NDA-II in 1999 to UPA-I in 2004), Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), Kerala Congress Mani (KCM), Muslim League (MUL), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Revolutionary Party of India-Athvale (RPI-A), Arunachal Congress (AC), Jammu and Kashmir People's Democratic Party (JKPDP), Lok Jan Shakti Party (LJNSP), Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), Rashtriya Parivartan Dal (RPD), Revolutionary Party of India (RPI) and Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS). The Left Front led by CPM provided outside support to the coalition. Even in the succeeding election of 2009, the shift was towards the advantage of INC. NCP, Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), IUML, KCM joined the UPA-II led by INC in 2009. The external support came from SP, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S), SDF, Bodoland People's Front (BPF), All Indian United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and Bahujan Vikas Aaghadi (BVA).

In the 2014 elections, 29 parties joined to form the BJP-led NDA coalition defeating the INC-led UPA coalition. The important members in the alliance were DMDK, PMK, MDMK, TDP, SHS, SAD, Swabhimani Paksha, LJNSP, Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP), Haryana Janhit Congress (HJC), Apna Dal, NPP and NPF. This election marked a huge victory for BJP-led NDA. The victory of BJP in the 2014 elections, which led the experts on party politics to predict as if the polity was returning back to the single-party majority government as was marked during the tenure of INC. As of 2019 general elections, the BJP led NDA is the ruling coalition in the parliament under the leadership of Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi.

Therefore it can be said that the trend of coalition politics has begun in India in some form way back in 1977. It received a halt in 1980 and 1984. From 1989 onwards, it is difficult to think of India without coalition governments. Coalition politics has become a norm for the country. This may be due to the gradual decline of the Congress system accompanied by the fragmentation of parties.

Coalitions at the State Level

Coalition politics in India is marked by the evolution of major and minor parties that is caused due to the splits and mergers. It includes both forging the alliances between the existing parties as well as splitting the parties into groups to facilitate alliances. All major parties in India have undergone splits, mergers and counter-splits since independence. The fragmentation of political parties was basically marked since 1989. However, at the state level the party systems were less fragmented. Ignoring ideological differences, the need of the hour is that the national parties require the support of the regional parties i.e. pre-electoral alliances to form a stable full term coalition at the centre.

It was only after 1996, that we mark the rise of inter-state territorial coalitions. Intra-state alliances based either on ideology or territorial compatibility has also marked the significant presence. Territorial compatibility can be of two types: firstly, alliance between regional party and the state unit of the national party. In this case we find the regional parties get the maximum share of Lok Sabha as well as Assembly seats. Secondly, alliance between the national party and the minor regional parties. In this case the national party gets the maximum share of both Lok Sabha and Assembly seats. Since the nineties, it is territorial compatibility that is given more importance in comparison to ideological compatibility, particularly the UF coalition, the INC led alliances of 2004 and 2009 or the BJP led alliances of 1998, 1999, 2014 and 2019 (Sridharan, 2008).

The Coalition politics is making its way in different states. Over different time and space, many states have joined the race of forming two-party systems or in fact two coalitions. The INC till the early 2000 remained in power almost in all Indian states. The northern and western states of India saw BJP's strength. Since 1977, the CPM found its base in West Bengal. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK and the AIADMK, the two Tamil nationalist parties are the two major contestants. Other major parties include the SP and the BSP in Uttar Pradesh; the SAD in Punjab; the TDP in Andhra Pradesh; the RJD in Bihar. These regional parties are part of the alliances led by either INC or the BJP.

Among the states of India, mainly we find party coalitions in large states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. These states can be grouped into one category, which are experiencing or have experienced party coalitions across time and space. The second category consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Rajasthan, Sikkim and Tripura, which have no experience or are not in the frequent race of party coalitions.

Thus from all the discussion, we find the following emerging trends in India's coalition politics:

- (a) BJP and the INC are the two national parties in the race to acquire the alliances leadership
- (b) Lack of importance of the Third Front.
- (c) Regional Parties have started playing their significant role in the politics of India.
- (d) Each section of the voters has a party to present their voice.
- (e) If we compare leadership with the institutions, the former has become more important than the latter.

Conclusion

To conclude, within the federal framework of Indian politics and as laid down by the Indian constitution, the states day by day are fairly increasing their autonomy. On one hand, the national parties like the INC and the BJP enjoys nation-wide appeal, on the other hand, the regional parties plays an important role in their respective provinces. Voting pattern also differs i.e. people who vote for INC or BJP in the Lok Sabha elections, may not necessarily vote for the same party during the assembly elections. Their preference may shift to their respective regional parties.

There appears to be two kinds of coalitions, first that exists within the party as was the Congress case during its lengthy period of rule, and the second is the alliances of different political parties. In the second category the coalition maybe based on pluralism as was between congress and the Third Front or anti-congress opposition as was between BJP and other regional parties. Thus, in India's case, it is untimely to conclude that the age of coalition politics is over or that a new party hegemonic system dominated by BJP is now in place. Coalition politics at the centre and in many states as well as for party strategies in coming general and also for state assembly elections will remain central to Indian politics.

Endnotes

1. If we look into the literature of the coalition politics, we come across two shortcomings. First, less research is conducted on the theoretical and empirical aspects of pre-electoral coalitions. Second, the case study of India is often not included in the literature when compared to other parliamentary democracies. The western countries are more in the focus (Lefebvre and Cyril, 2009, <http://samaj.revenues.org/index2795.html>, retrieved on 20th March, 2021).
2. The 1977 marked a competitive environment of the electoral system. The decline of the strong national leadership and authority of the state, rise of new regional actors, new definitions of politics and political expression are the developments in the political setup (Kothari, 1988).

References

- Arora, B. (2002). "The Political Parties and the Party System: The Emergence of New Coalitions". (Ed. Zoya Hasan), Parties and Party Politics in India, pp.504-532, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Arora, B. & Kailash. K. K. (2011). "The New Party System: Federalised and Binodal". Draft for the Presentation at the Meeting on Party System in India and its Emerging Trajectories, March 24-25, pp.1-28.
- Caroll, R. (2008). "Parties, Alliances and Duverger's Law in India". Western Political Science Association, March 18-20, pp.1-35.
- Chakrabarty, B. (2006). Forging Power: Coalition Politics in India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Election Commission of India, http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx, retrieved on 21st March, 2021.
- Hardgrave, Robert L. & Stanley A. K. (2008). "The Emergence of Coalition Politics and Rise of the BJP". (Ed. Robert L. Hardgrave, and Stanley A. Kochanek), India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation, pp.314-346, Thomson Wadsworth, Belmont.
- Kothari, R. (1988). Communalism in Indian Politics, Rainbow Publishers, Ahmadabad
- Kumar, S. (2012). "Coalition Governments in India: 1952-1966", Journal of Politics & Governance, 1(4):24-35.
- Lefebvre, B. & Cyril, R. (2009). "Pre-electoral Coalitions, Party System and Electoral Geography: A Decade of General Elections in India (1999-2009)", SAMAJ, <http://samaj.revues.org/index2795.html>, retrieved on 20th March, 2021.
- Pai, S. (1998). "Indian Party System under Transformation: Lok Sabha Elections 1998", Asian Survey, 38(9):836-852.
- Roy, H. (2004). "Party Systems and Coalition Politics in Indian States", (Ed. Mahendra Prasad Singh, and Anil Mishra), Coalition Politics in India: Problems and Prospects, pp.137-153, Manohar, New Delhi.
- Sridharan, E. (2008). "Coalition Politics in India: Types, Duration, Theory and Comparison", Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) Working Paper, No.50, pp.1-51.

Sridharan, E. (2003). "Coalitions and Party Strategies in India's Parliamentary Federation", Publius, 33(4):135-152.