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Coalition Politics: Decline or Resurgence? An Evaluation of the Contemporary Indian Parliamentary Structure

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Abstract

Coalition politics has been an integral part of the history of parliamentary democracy in India. If we analyse national and regional politics over the last four decades, we find that India has transitioned from one-party dominance to a multi-party system. Against the backdrop of the present circumstances, an important question arises- is India returning to an era of majoritarian politics, or is it moving along a new path toward coalition politics? Analysis shows that despite a single party securing a clear majority in the Lok Sabha in 2014 and 2019, coalition (NDA) politics has not lost its relevance. In contemporary politics, pre-election coalitions and regional parties play a more decisive role than ever before. In a diverse country like India, single-party rule often fails to fully address the aspirations of marginalized communities. Coalition politics, on the other hand, opens up democratic space for regional and sectional voices, enabling them to participate in governance at the national level. At present, it can be observed that opposition parties are also attempting to maintain political balance by forming large scale alliance (such as INDIA) to counter single political force. Consequently, it is evident that coalition politics has not come to an end; rather, by means of new strategies and increasing political polarization, the Indian parliamentary system has re-established its strong position.

This paper presents a comprehensive discussion on the future trajectory of coalition politics and the qualitative transformations in the context of the Indian federal structure.

Keywords: Coalition Politics, Parliamentary Democracy in India, Majoritarianism, Federal Structure and Regional Parties, Political Alliances (NDA & INDIA Bloc)

Introduction:

In the history of Indian parliamentary democracy, coalition politics played a pivotal role in forming the government over the years. When no single party is able to secure majority after election results in democracy, political parties choose the path of forming coalition governments. Indian National Congress had been playing dominant role in the Indian Parliamentary since 1952, but this dominance of Indian National Congress in Indian politics came to a halt when the coalition government was formed in 1977 under the leadership of Morarji Desai. Rajni Kothari, an Indian political theorist, coined the term 'congress system' to describe the dominance of Indian National Congress in the Indian parliament over the years. He also termed this political system as 'multiple party system with one party

dominance. However, the influence of Congress party began to decrease after the imposition of emergency during the regime of Mrs Indra Gandhi. A rift in the congress party developed after the demise of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the rift widened when Mrs Gandhi was expelled from the party over the issue of the Presidential Election of 1969. Immediately after her expulsion, he formed a new party named Congress (Requisitionst). Consequently, the Indian National Congress divided into two factions. The old group known as Congress (organisation). Later Congress party led by Mrs Gandhi survived as the main Congress party. In the 1971 election, Congress gained massive victory under Mrs Gandhi's charismatic leadership. Proclamation of nationwide emergency by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister temporarily tarnished her charismatic leadership. As a result, people of India paid her back in her own coin in the 1977 General election. In this election she suffered a heavy loss.

Thus, the first Non-Congress Government was formed at the centre in 1977 under the leadership of Morarji Desai. Though in the 1980 and 1984 election the Indian National Congress got a clear majority, India was at the hands of coalition governments with no major single party between 1996 and 1999. From 1999 onwards India was governed by the coalition governments namely National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance. India witnessed this phase of coalition governments but not likely the phase of instability from 1989 to 1999 with the election of 1991 as exception when INC led by P.V. Narsima Rao came back with simple majority and completed its full term. From 2014 -2024 India once again witnessed a strong government with a single majority party led by Bharatiya Janata Party. Once again regional parties showed their strength in the 2024 Lok Sabha. In this Lok Sabha, JDU of Nitish Kumar and TDP of Andhra Pradesh are the two main pillars to hold the coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. In these circumstances, a question is uppermost in the mind of political theorists. Is India returning to the phase of Coalition politics? (Kothari, 2006)

Coalition Politics in India over the years:

From the first election of 1952 Indian National Congress had been enjoying power in parliament till 1975. But declaration of Emergency during the regime of Mrs. Gandhi in 1975 acted as a boomerang and Morarji Desai made most of it by organising non congress parties. Consequently, in 1977 the first non-congress government was emerged under the leadership of Morarji Desai at parliament. However, this government did not show its potential for long. On the other hand, Indra Gandhi tried to regain public support. Morarji Desai resigned from the head of the Government due to internal conflict within the party. Accordingly, the government broke apart before long. Chowdhury Charan Singh took the lead of the Government which was supported externally by the INC. However, very soon, Chowdhury Charan Singh Govt collapsed due to the withdrawal of support of Congress from the Government and the Lok Sabha was dissolved accordingly. (Chakraborty, 2014)

Mrs. Indra Gandhi again rose to power with a striking majority. In this phase of her political career, she faced the instability marked by the rise of separatist movement called Khalistani movement. Mrs. Gandhi confronted the situation with an iron hand. On the order of the Prime Minister, Operation Blue Star was launched in the Golden Temple to eradicate the armed rebellion. This Act shook the many Sheikhs with fury leading to her assassination by her own body guard on 31st October, 2024. At this juncture, her son Mr. Rajib Gandhi assumed the post of Prime Minister. Soon after he was sworn in as the Prime Minister, Lok

Sabha election was declared in the month of December, 1984. Congress party with the face of Rajib Gandhi and the public sympathy following his mother's assassination was given huge mandate by the people in the 1984 General Election forming the govt. However, in 1989 the Indian National Congress again faced the set back as the party was unable to obtain majority. The Indian Parliament again became hung parliament. V.P. Singh became Prime Minister of the coalition government by forming a post poll alliance under the banner National Front Govt and getting support externally from Left and BJP. The introduction of the Mandal Commission for the reservation of the Other Backward Classes during this regime ignited nationwide protest and political unrest. L.K. Advani, the then President of Bharatiya Janata Party, utilized the opportunity of coalition government by organising Rath Yatra all over India to inject the Hindutva Nationalism among the masses and to mobilize the support for constructing Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. BJP an insisted on getting support from V.P. Singh government for Ram Temple cause. V.P Singh refused to surrender his demand and Mr Advani was arrested in Bihar to prevent communal clash. Arrest of Party president evoked strong sentiment within party against the government. The BJP, consequently, discontinued its support from the government leading to the collapse of V.P. Singh Government. After resignation of Mr Shing, Chandra Sekhar took the office as Prime Minister by receiving external support from Congress but Chandra Sekhar Government did survive for long due to many issues such as oil crisis in the Middle East during this time which had unfavourable impact on Indian economy. Besides Chandra Sekhar had developed a dispute with the Congress over the matters of policy making and governance; as a result, congress withdrew its support from Chandra Sekhar paving the way for fresh election. (Khanna, 1999)

In 1991 during the election campaign Mr Rajib Gandhi was assassinated which was a big setback for the Congress Party. A vacuum created within the Congress regarding the leadership. However, in the 1991 election, The INC emerged as the largest single party but did not get absolute majority in spite of that congress managed to form Government by receiving external support of left parties and regional parties. Amid the vacuum of leadership, the veteran congress leader chose Mr. P.V. Narsima Rao as leader of the government and finally broke the political deadlock situation of 2 years. In spite of being a coalition government, the government emphasised the liberation of the economy. If we call the ten years (from 1989 to 1999) an age of coalition govt characterized by instability of govt, the utmost phase of instability occurred between 1996 and 1999 with three Prime Ministers along with Atal Bihari Vajpayee- who served as the Prime Minister of India for 13 days, in the span of three years. Bajpayee assumed the head of the govt throughout 1996-1999. In the 1996 election, BJP showed its strength by becoming the largest party under the leadership of Bajpayee but very soon Bajpayee had to resign after 13 days due to its failure to prove majority in parliament. This initiated the instability in the parliament. Then, soon a new coalition named United Front alliance under the leadership of H.D. Deve Gowda by taking outside support from Congress. But he faced wrath from Congress as there had been disagreement with his leadership. This government, under the leadership of H.D Deve Gowda, remained in power for almost 11 months. However, before facing no confidence motion, he resigned from the post of Prime Minister after the Indian National Congress pulled back its support from the government. In this these circumstances the congress gave their support to the United Front coalition but did not continue to support Deve Gowda as

prime minister. I.K. Gujral entered this scenario of the political stage and he swear as Prime Minister of India in 1997. But very soon after remaining in power for almost one year he had a tussle with the congress party regarding the Jain commission report. On the basis of the report of the Jain commission congress put pressure on I.K Gujral to remove DMK from United front coalition. I. K Gujral refused congress' demand of removing DMK from cabinet. As a result, congress withdrew its support from I.K Gujral government resulting in his resignation from the post of government and subsequently dissolution of Lok Sabha. In the 1998 general election BJP emerged as the largest party. The National Democratic Alliance under the leadership of Bajpayee came to power in 1998. After one year of the formation of the government, Mr. Bajpayee faced no confidence motion and lost by 1 vote. A fresh election was declared accordingly. In this election govt. was formed by NDA with clear majority under Leadership of Bajpayee. This time Bajpayee returned to power with more confidence and completed a five-year tenure in parliament. Bajpayee announced early election in 2004 hoping for a good mandate but he was unable to fathom the strong anti-incumbency against the Govt leading to his defeat in the election.

A new coalition, namely United Progressive Alliance, came to power under the leadership of Dr. Monmohon Singh. This alliance government was given support externally from the Communist Party of India and left parties. In 2008 this government was about to collapse when left parties pulled back its support from the coalition government over the nuclear deal. But Govt continue to exist after some parties and independent parties backed the coalition government. Social welfare schemes, right to education, right to information and economic growth and stability helped UPA come into power again. UPA-II Government entangled themselves with various corruption charges and other economic issues during this period. These issues of UPA-II Govt helped BJP counter the congress and consolidate themselves as an alternative party against corruption in the 2014 election. (Basu, 2019)

Revival of single party in 2014 and 2019:

From 1989 to 2014 Indian parliament was run by several coalition governments. Scenario of government began to change since 2014 when the BJP with the face of Narendra Modi was given huge mandate by the people of India Though BJP contested elections with its alliances, the BJP turned out to be the biggest single largest party that easily passed the magic figure of Indian parliament. Apart from alliances, the BJP alone gained 282 seats. Undoubtedly, it's a great achievement for Narendra Modi as India witnessed after a long period of time that a single party gained absolute majority under the leadership of Mr Modi came to power. Hindutva agenda along with advertisement of Mr. Modi's Gujrat model pave the way of coming to power. In the 2019 election BJP alone utilizing Hindutva politics obtained more seats than that of 2014. Mr. Modi again came to power with more confidence. The presence of Congress as the opposition party failed to act in parliament. In spite of being a coalition government the BJP, having achieved absolute majority, played a significant role in decision making without much consideration of its alliances. In this Lok Sabha, roughly speaking, the role of opposition parties had been reduced in governance.

The 2024 Election: Indian parliament again embraced the coalition politics:

Majoritarian politics came to halt in the 2024 election. Most of the political analysts thought the BJP alone would break the record of Congress under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 when congress alone got 400 seats out of 514 Lok Sabha seats. In democracy people would finally decide the mandate. Modi's chariot with the aura of Hindutva stopped at 240.

On the other hand, if the opposition alliance namely, INDIA had wanted to form the government, they would have depended on the two bigger alliances. After a period of ten years opposition parties asserted their role in governance. Once the giant BJP had to depend on two alliances- one is Chandrababu Naidu and the other is Nitisha Kumar's JDU. On the other hand, if the opposition alliance namely, INDIA had wanted to form the government, they would have depended on the two bigger alliances. After a period of ten years opposition parties established themselves as formidable forces in parliament. People of India again showed the Single Majority party that India, like its unity in diversity, has also diversity in the field of politics.

Coalition government and federal structure of Govt:

Coalition politics play a significant role in the federal structure in parliamentary democracy of India. Parties that have a bigger presence all over India become dependent on regional parties as their alliances are required to form government. As a result, regional parties play crucial roles in shaping policies and decisions including financial aid to the states. When coalition governments run, other political alliances particularly regional parties can assert their other political priorities which sometimes become very effective to the marginalized sections of people in a country like India. Coalition politics has demerits too. Coalition government, no doubt, strengthens the regional interest, but principal political party in the coalition government, sometimes, has to compromise with the demand of other alliances which sometimes can hamper the national interest and can also challenge national stability. The principal party in the coalition Government sometimes cannot take firm decisions in shaping decisions that matters national interest. In coalition politics, sometimes, the government faces the risk of collapse due to internal conflict within the alliance which is not good for the stability of a country.

Coalition politics in West Bengal:

Coalition politics West Bengal is not exceptional. Coalition politics in West Bengal started in 1967 when Bangla Congress made alliance with left parties. Though this coalition government did not last long, this coalition government showed how two ideologically different parties formed government for the sake of political interest. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) along with left parties namely Forward Block, RSP was in power for 34 years. Left parties exerted influence on the elite class as well as on the masses through its ideologies and activities. During this left regime, common people actively participated in the politics.

In 2011, 34 years of 'left regime' lost to the coalition namely Trinamool Congress and Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. From 2016 onwards TMC alone contested elections in West Bengal. Though the ruling TMC govt fought alone in the election, the opposition parties making alliances fought election in West Bengal. In 2016, Communist Party along with left parties of India made alliance with their arch rival-INC. In spite of its alliance with its arch rival, the left front was defeated by the ruling TMC.

In 2021 also the left parties made alliance with the INC and Indian Secular Front but faced the fate of miserable defeat. While the Indian Secular Front in the coalition managed to get one 1 seat, the CPIM and INC did not get any seat in the election. The ruling TMC emerged victorious with a clear majority, winning more seats than ever before. Worth mentioning in the history of West Bengal politics is the emergence of BJP as opposition party.

Conclusion:

Coalition politics is not unusual in the largest democracy of the world, rather it reflects the basic characteristics of the country- unity in diversity. Congress was given mandate consistently by the people of India over the years. With the passage of time people shifted their mandate to another party in hope that their grievance would be addressed. Unfortunately, successive govt failed to fully resolved issues. It is true that a stable govt is much more capable than an unstable one. In this context we can affirm that a coalition government which often face the risk of collapse due to internal conflict among the alliances sometimes struggle to meet the demand of the people. In the whirl of the Modi wave many believed that the coalition politics lost its credibility. The scenario started changing after the general election of 2024 when coalition politics once again came to the forefront. In this scenario regional parties as usual, would emphasise their demand more than ever in the coming days. Upcoming 2029 elections both the alliances of NDA and alliances of INDIA will try to achieve their respective goal- one striving to retain power and the other aiming to gain the power. Anticipating the 2029 election it is quite obvious that the Indian parliament will again embrace coalition government.

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