



## COALITION POLITICS IN INDIA: A STUDY



Shivabasappa. B. Israji<sup>1</sup> and S. A. Palekar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Gulbarga University, Kalaburgi.

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Gulbarga University, Kalaburgi.

### ABSTRACT:

The term 'Coalition' as it is generally used in politics, is a direct descendant of the exigencies of multi-party system in a democratic set-up. It is a phenomenon of a multi-party government where a number of majority parties join hands for the purpose of running the government, which is otherwise not possible in a democracy based on a one-party system.

**KEY WORDS:** Coalition Politics, multi-party system, party foibles and frantic party fervor.

### INTRODUCTION:

A coalition is formed when many splinter groups in a House agree to join hands on a common platform by sinking their broad differences and form a majority in the House. It is an astonishing chorus of discords. Though outwardly coalition appears to be one solid mass, inwardly it is ridden by party foibles and frantic party fervor and it is for this reason that coalition proves to be transient.<sup>1</sup>

Meaning and Nature of Coalition Politics

The term 'coalition' is derived from the Latin

word 'coalition' which is the verbal substantive of coalescere-co, which means together and alescere which means to go or to grow together. According to the dictionary meaning, coalition means an act of coalescing, or uniting into one body, a union of persons, states or an alliance. It is a combination of a body or part into one whole. In the strict politics sense the word 'coalition' is used for an alliance or temporary union for joint action of various powers or status and also of the

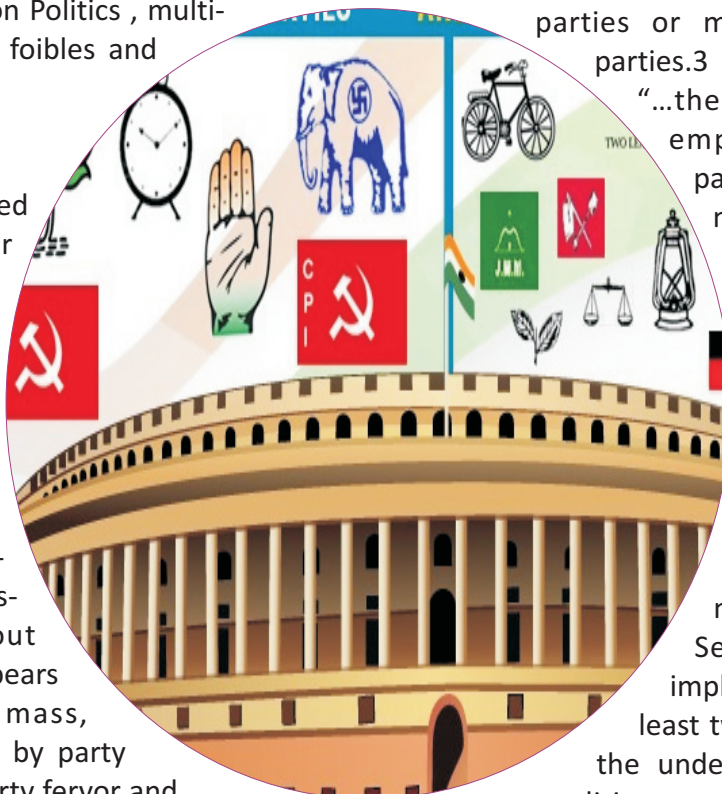
union into a single government of distinct parties or members of distinct parties.<sup>3</sup> According to Ogg:

"...the term coalition as employed in political parties or at all events members of such parties unite to form a government or ministry.<sup>4</sup>

The system of coalition has certain implications.<sup>5</sup>

Firstly, coalitions are formed for the sake of some reward, material or psychic. Secondly, a coalition implies the existence of at least two partners. Thirdly, the underlying principle of a coalition system stands on the

simple fact of temporary conjunction of specific interests. Fourthly, coalition politics is not a static but a dynamic affair as coalition players



and groups dissolve, and form new ones. Fifthly, the keynote of coalition politics is compromise and a rigid dogma has no place in it. Sixthly, a coalition Government works on the basis of minimum programme, which may not be ideal for each partner of the coalition. After all, politics is the act of the possible and coalition politics is its highest expression. Seventhly, pragmatism and not ideology is the hallmark of coalition politics. In making politics adjustments, principles may have to be set aside and in this process ideology is the first casualty. Lastly, the purpose of a coalition adjustment is to seize power; it may seek to stake its claim for the formation of a Ministry or for pulling a Ministry down. As former Governor of Punjab, D.C. Pavate visualized; if the purpose of forming a coalition is to topple the existing government without any common programme of action or approach, the coalition, however, broadbased or cohesive it may be, would not provide for stability and would in its turn be the victim of the same process of defections.<sup>6</sup>

Quite often coalitions are formed to prevent a common enemy from capturing power. In this context the coalescing parties having ideological differences are compelled to come to an understanding, as they have to choose the lesser of the two evils. There have been instances of the Rightists and Leftists coming together to challenge the citadels of the ruling party. Equally interesting is the instance of the communists and anti-communists forging an alliance to face a common enemy. A coalition devoid of ideological moorings survives till the enemy is humbled. Once the euphoria of victory is over, differences come to the surface and the structure collapses like a pack of cards.

There are a good number of instances of parties shifting their alliance in search of fresh pastures. If power is the only motive behind joining a coalition, realignment will be a regular feature. Indeed, in a coalition set-up alliances go on changing like the sand dunes of a typical desert. No coalition partner has permanent friends or enemies, it has only permanent interests.

### COALITION GOVERNMENT IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Coalitions are fairly common in England and experiments have not proved to be very successful. That is why when faced with the prospective coalition of Russell and Aberdeen in 1852, Disraeli declared: "England does not do coalitions". However, this remark seems to be an exaggeration in the light of history because when Pitt the Elder took over in 1757, he joined hands with the Whig aristocracy represented by the Duke of Newcastle. Similarly, in 1782, a coalition ministry was formed in England when Fox, the leader of the reformers, joined forces with Lord North, the leader of the opposition party, and formed a great coalition. After the resignation of Lord Derby in December 1852, a coalition ministry came into being in England, which lasted until January 1855. There was a coalition in 1895 between the Liberal Unionists and Conservatives in Lord Salisbury's third Ministry. A similar coalition was formed in 1931 when a group of the Labour Party, a group of Liberal Party and the whole Conservative Party joined forces under Ramsay MacDonald. In 1940, the Labour Party, Liberals and Conservatives formed a coalition under Winston Churchill which lasted until 1945.

In continental countries where there is a multi-party system, coalitions are the rule, not the exceptions in France, Switzerland and in Scandinavian countries. There is multiplicity of parties which range from six to seven in France and Germany and in these countries coalition provides a workable means whereby the machinery of the state is efficaciously run.

### POLITICS OF COALITION IN INDIA

Just after independence, the Indian National Congress was the only national party which commanded popularity and respect of the people. This party undoubtedly had a mass base and grassroots in India. It remained in power both at the Centre as well as in the states right from 1947 to

1967 and it had a monolithic character. But, it also had a coalition character. The Congress was a grand coalition with great historic antecedents. This was because it was a party of the Centre with a bias towards the left adhering to set of ideals which are shared by other parties and groups, whether rights or leftist. The coalition character of the congress organization formed a predominant model providing both intra and inter-party competitive-cum-coalition model without allowing for the alternative of power as far as possible. It created a very peculiar situation in which non-Congress parties acted essentially as catalysts for groups within the Congress fold to articulate their discontent and grievances in order to bring about leadership changes in the single-dominant party system. This is evident from the Presidential election of August 1969. A group of relatively junior Congressmen (called Young Turks) attracted the leftist organizations who formed a workable coalition to defeat the official Congress nominee. The old guard (known as the Syndicate) associated themselves with the rights forces to defeat the no-official Congress candidate.

The interim government of Jawarhalal Nehru was a coalition of the Congress and the Muslim League. Perhaps, there was also a virtual coalition at the Centre level after the Congress split in 1969, with the Congress (R), CPI and DMK as its more or less stable partners together with some floating ones, choosing to join hands with it from issue to issue. The formation of the first Janta Government at the Centre was the result of an accommodative spirit of its constituent political groups, who agreed that they would each have two members in the cabinet. The power struggle within the coalition was muted at the time of the formation of the Central Government. Once Moraji Desai was chosen as Prime Minister, it was up to him to balance the diverse political elements the Centre. But he kept his own counsel and filled his cabinet with his own blind supporters. This was resented by other groups of the coalition. The Janata coalition collapsed like a house of cards in July 1979 when floodgates of defections opened with the departure of various groups leaders like George Fernandes, H.N. Bahuguna, Biju Patnaik and Madhu Limaye. Even regional groups like the Akali Dal and the DMK withdrew their support. A new coalition government was formed with Charan Singh as the Prime Minister in October 1979. This coalition included leaders and groups from one end of the spectrum to the other—from the CPM and the CPI on the hand to those who were close to business. The eleventh Lok Sabha election (1996) once again saw a 'huge parliament'. President invited the leader of the single largest party, Atal Bihari Vajpayee to form the government. He took the oath of the office of the Prime Minister on 15th May, 1996. However, he had to make an unceremonious exit on May 28, 1996 after being in office for only 13 days, without even seeking a vote of confidence in the parliament. This led to the formation of the wide ranging coalition with 13 parties coming together known as United Front. Mr. Dewa Gowda, leader of the United Front became the Prime Minister for 10 months when he was voted out on 11th April 1997. In his place I.K. Gujral assumed office of the Prime Minister from Dewa Gowda on 21st April, 1997. He too was running a coalition government. His 8 months old government resigned after the withdrawal of support by the Congress party. After the 12th Lok Sabha elections BJP and its most wide ranging allies of 18 political parties led by A.B. Vajpayee, as Prime Minister, assumed office on the March, 1998. This also is coalition government. After the 13th Lok Sabha elections Atal Bihari Vajpayee once again led a coalition government. He assumed office of Prime Minister on 13 October, 1999. National Democratic Alliance consists of: BJP 182; Biju Patnaik J. Dal 10; DMK 12, Indian National Lok Dal 5; Janata Dal (united)20; M.Dramuk 4; Manipure State Congress 1; National Conference 4; Loktantrika Congress 2; P.M.A. 5; M.G.R. Dramuk 01; Mijo National Front 01; Shiv Sena 15; Sikkim Democratic Front 01; Trinamul Congress 8; Himachal Vikas Congress 01; Maneka Gandhi Independent 01=275 + 29 TDP supporting from outside.

### COALITION POLITICS IN THE STATES

The 1967 elections, as already stated, were one of the most important events in Indian politics in the post-Independence period. It led to the replacement of single-dominant party system by the multi-party system in which no particular party claimed absolute majority at all levels of the political structure with the result that the model of intra-party (tacit or implied) coalition was replaced by the intra-party (express or formal) coalition system. The elections brought an end to one era-the era of Congress domineering rule the Centre and in most of the states- and opened another-an era of a weakened Congress governments in six states. In seven states, viz, Bihar, Kerala, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, coalitions of no-congress parties endeavoured to form governments, and except in the case of Rajasthan they succeeded in doing so.

### SALIENT FEATURES OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENTS

The salient features of the coalition government formed after the fourth general elections are as follows:

- 1.Unstable coalitions: Coalition government were unstable governments since they had no inherent compatibility amongst to the breakup not only of various fronts but of governments as well.
- 2.Anti-Congress: The main object of the coalition was to dislodge the Congress Party and to break its monopoly. The high priest of this strategy was the late Ram Manohar Lohia. D.C. Pavate rightly observes: "The Prime reason for such a coalition of opposition groups was not to provide an alternative government with a purposive programme different from that of the Congress but to oust the Congress from power somehow or the other."
- 3.Lack of polarization: The coalitions were marriages of convenience. They were not formed on principles or on the basis of polarization of political forces. There were widely heterogeneous elements like the CPI and Jana Sangh. It was just for the sake of capturing power that issues of ideological significance were either side-stepped or compromised and non-Congress coalitions of a most heterogeneous variety came into being. Indeed there was no sincere urge for political polarization even among the parties of the same ideology.
- 4.Based on political defections: These coalitions proved to be dependent upon a few 'Aya Rams' and Gaya Rams' present in almost every Legislative Assembly. Thus, defections really became in charge of the making and unmaking of coalition and for their
- 5.Political opportunism: The most critical component in the development of the coalitions was political opportunism, coalition governments turned into a session of egotistical, go getter, power-hungry and unscrupulous politicians who had to took after nothing but their personal interests.

Coalition governments continued to be unstable. Those which were based on a pre-electoral agreement among ideologically similar parties fared somewhat better than those formed after the election. The Orissa coalition, which was formed between two compatible rightist parties, lasted throughout the period. The coalitions which were least viable were those in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Meghalaya. Both included such heterogeneous members as the Jana Sangh and the Communist Party of India. Anti- Congressism did not have a very cohesive effect. The common programmes which were agreed to by the partners at the time of the formation of these governments were hurriedly drafted and attempted to cover all differences, which later proved difficult to resolve.

There was general agreement on things of a general nature such as the promotion of education, price control, undertaking of social welfare activities, the installation of tubewells, etc. But insistence

by the Jana Sangh and the SSP on the abolition of English and the compulsory use of Hindi became a major source of dissent in the Bihar and U.P. coalitions. The CPI (M)'s adherence to gheraos, violence and resort to similar means was never palatable to its other partners in the West Bengal coalition. Chief Minister Ajoy Mukherjee came out in the open against his own government. The political parties entering coalitions, considered it more of an opportunity than a responsibility and tried to use it to strengthen their political base in society. This led them to take possession of key portfolios in the government through which vast power of resources and patronage could be commanded. Thus, portfolio arrangements, were often quite temporary. Discipline, so essential for running a government, was at a low ebb. The Chief Ministers were neither feared nor respected. They were no longer architects of a cabinet and were incapable of taking any vital decision on their own. Ajoy Mukherjee's 'satyagraha' in West Bengal against his own colleagues, who, he thought, were not seeing reason, illustrates the helplessness of some Chief Ministers in coalition governments. The Chief Minister, in fact, was not a leader of a cabinet, but just one of it. Some of the Chief Ministers, e.g., Ajoy Mukherjee of West Bengal and Charan Singh of U.P., were not even leaders of the dominant parties in the legislature. They became Chief Minister because the mathematics of politics favoured them and the dominant parties used their ministerial positions to consolidate the strength of themselves or their own party rather than for a coalition governmental purpose.

The Congress Party in these coalition states did not reconcile itself with an opposition role. Critics pointed out that it resorted to the same methods for regaining its lost power that the others had used. Besides the usual financial and power appeals, they could use the state Governors.

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