

Coalition Governments in India: Political Perspective

Sangeeta Yellappa*

[India chose democracy and that for almost 70 years now we have worked a vibrant democratic system, as a major achievement. The study of coalitions is at a very infant stage and of recent advent in India. However, it may prove to be of enormous importance for our country. These coalitions are a necessary stage in the evolution of democracy. They might constitute a natural step in the process of transformation from a multi-party system to a bi-party system in India, a country where exist some hundred plus political parties. The present paper discusses various dimension of coalition governments and its saga of coalition government in India.]

The fact that India chose democracy and that for almost 70 years now we have worked a vibrant democratic system, is a major achievement. However, it is quite clear that we are going through a period of tremendous turbulence. The old consensus seems to have broken down; a new equilibrium has not yet been reached. The belief that the era of coalition governments, even at the Centre, some states already having undergone and others undergoing such an experiment, is here to stay in India is for sure.

The study of coalitions is at a very infant stage and of recent advent in India. However, it may prove to be of enormous importance for our country. These coalitions are a necessary stage in the evolution of democracy. They might constitute a natural step in the process of transformation from a multi-party system to a bi-party system in India, a country where exist some hundred plus political parties.

In India, the first-ever government formed by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, between 1946 and 1952, may rightly be described as a coalition government in which apart from the Congress, the Muslim League (until the partition), the Hindu Mahasabha, the Republican Party and other minor parties participated. After the First General Elections in 1952 the Congress retained the near monopoly of power, both at the Centre and in the States in the formative stage of independent India.

Objectives of the Study

The current study intends to find out the rise of the Indian coalition governments in general and an

assessment of the working of coalitions at the Centre in India from 1989 to 2004 in particular. The following objectives have been set for our research investigation:

1. To know the working of coalition in the Indian context.
2. To examine the performance of the coalitions internationally.
3. To evaluate the issues before the coalition governments in India.
4. To suggest remedial measures to better the performance of coalition governments.

Methodology

The current research study falls under the category of *ex post facto* and analytical research. The methodology adopted therefore, is historical and descriptive in nature. Hence, the study relies on both the primary as well as secondary data.

Review of Literature

Notwithstanding the fact that coalition government is not a new phenomenon, not just in India but the world over as well, no studies worth mentioning have been made about them more so in the recent years when coalition type government has become the order of the day. Of course, there have been some scanty works carried on somewhere in the early 1970s when the nation witnessed for the first time the coalition form of government at the Centre but these failed to cover all the aspects since the coalitions then were predominantly a single party domain.

For the first time, the problems and prospects of the coalition type of government were presented in

* Ph. D Scholar, Dept of Pol. Sc., Gulbarga University, Kalburgi, Karnataka.

a very lucid manner by Sahni. He examines the theory of coalitions and the defections of the coalitions as system of governance. The theory of coalition from international perspectives illustrating examples of countries like Lebanon, Ceylon, U.K. and France, apart from discussing the utility, durability and workability of the coalition set up for a diverse nation like India from historical, cultural and economic background. Some relevant political factors and political parties, their behaviour and its comparative analysis are also aptly dealt in. The history and evolution of coalitions, experimentation of a new coalition, working of a coalition, neo-federalism in India and the Cabinet system in a coalition situation were studied by Kashyap: the coalition of instability is an arena which has received very scanty attention down the ages, which has been treated appropriately by Chander, apart from considering the political ideologies and the coalition politics in India, in general.

In his acclaimed classic, Riker expounds the model of political behaviour, the assumptions of the model, the condition of rationality and the zero-sum condition. The size principle, the application of the size principle and strategy in coalition building, components of disequilibrium all receive considerable attention by the scholar in his *magnum opus* on the topic.

Thakurta and Shankar analyse the performance of the national parties like the Bhartiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress and the regional parties as well demonstrating that coalition is not a myth but a striking reality for a nation like India both at the Central and the State level. The trends and problems of the coalitional politics, experiences and prospects of the United Front government, an analysis of the minority governments in India and the crises of governance and coalition government form the main chords of the works of Sundaram.

The history of coalition-making in India and typology of coalition receive a massive treatment in the hands of Maheshwari. The aftermath of the downfall of the Deve Gowda's government and the overtaking of the reins of the national political charter by Gujral and thereafter has been very keenly scrutinized by Sachdeva.

Analysis and Discussion

A study of coalition system in Indian politics, as a matter of fact, makes it clear that every student of

Indian political system today accepts that era of coalition politics has now fully dawned. Coalition government is usually organized when no party is in a position to get a majority in the parliament, and some parties form a coalition group or an alliance for forming a government. It also happens when before an election several parties form an alliance or a 'coalition group' and which after getting a majority or after emerging as the single largest group in the legislature forms government in which all coalition partners find a berth / berths in the council of ministers. A pre-poll coalition group always contests elections on the basis of common manifesto or an agreed programme and politics behind which all the coalition partners are united through a consensus.

When the coalition group as a whole secures a majority in elections it gets the mandate to rule and implement its agreed programme and policies. Consequently it forms a government in which every coalition partner has a share and the coalition government exercises power for getting effect to the agreed policies and programmes. In other words, a coalition government means the formation of a government by a group of political parties and coalition politics means the collective exercise of power by a group of political parties as coalition partners. India is not the first nation to form the coalition government; we find it even in England, France, Germany, Switzerland, etc. The present paper discusses the various dimension of coalition governments and its saga of coalition government in India.

Phases of Coalition Government

1. *Pre-Election Coalition*: It means adjustment between the parties. This type of coalition is very important as it occurs prior to election. It fosters better understanding between the political parties in general and the party members in particular which provides a common platform and attracts the voters on the basis of a joint manifesto.
2. *Post-Election Alliance*: Unlike pre-election alliance, here the understanding between the parties or the leaders representing them occurs only after they are done with the general election. It is a union to share political power and run the government. It is a compromise or agreement after the election. In other words, it is an opportunistic type of coalition.

Features of Coalition Government in India

We can identify the following features of coalition politics in India. They are:

1. A coalition government is organized by two or more political parties.
2. Coalition politics is a collaborative, co-operative effort in which some political parties together exercise political power i.e., form a government to make binding decisions for the whole society.
3. At times some political parties form a pre-poll alliance and contest the elections collectively by fielding common candidates in various constituencies. After getting a majority in the elections, the coalition partners collectively form a government.
4. At times when no party is in a position to get a majority some parties form a coalition for organizing government. The coalition partners then share the exercise of power of the State. Gomson makes it clear that-”it is the joint use of resources to determine the outcome of a decision in a mixed motive situation involving more than two units”.
5. The exercise of power is undertaken for implementing the agreed politics and programmes. In case the coalition alliance or group is organized before the elections a common election manifesto is prepared, adopted and released.
6. The coalition alliance either elects or selects a coalition leader in advance or elects such leader after the elections. The coalition government is organized under the leadership of such a person.
7. Coalition government is always based on a compromise or agreement. In decision-making all the coalition partners try to practice decision-making by consensus. Each coalition partner has to accommodate the wishes, desires and policies of the other partners.
8. A coalition government has usually a large sized Council of Ministers because all the coalition partners have to be given a berth in the Ministry however, 97th Amendment of the constitution restricted 15 percent of the total members.

On the basis of these features coalition politics comes into operation either through a pre-poll

coalition alliance or through a post-poll alliance which is in majority in the legislature.

Emergence of Coalitions Governments

The emergence of coalition governments has become a world-wide phenomenon. Although the coalition’s nature, composition, life expectancy, etc vary from country to country, depending on particular political circumstances, the basic reasons for the rising popularity of a coalition remain more or less the same. The first and the most obvious cause are related to the political aspect. Contrary to the general belief, coalitions are basically a result rather than a cause of political unrest. It is the dissatisfaction with the single majority rule and its failure to respond to the changing public needs that forces the electorate to resort to other alternatives. Very often the members of the *ruling* majority party, not content with its working, break away and form smaller fractions. These fractions then frame their own policies and developmental programmes, not radically different from those of the parent party having a somewhat different approach towards issues.

This creates instability and crisis within the political spheres and confusion among the voters, with the result that no party is able to muster the majority of votes. In such circumstances, a coalition becomes a compulsion rather than a mere alternative.

The second and the more significant reason for the emergence of coalitions can be traced to fundamental changes in the structure of the society. A society in a transitional phase provides conditions most conducive for a coalition. Politics does not operate in a vacuum; it reflects the social, cultural, economic and historical forces at struggle. No society today is static. This is especially true of India today. Society here is undergoing fragmentation not just in terms of the obvious caste, religious, economic factors but also in terms of class, lifestyle, profession etc. depending on these socio-cultural and economic divisions, the needs and Interests of the masses vary. In such a situation, it is impossible for a single political party to cater to the variegated and heterogeneous needs of the people. Moreover, national parties tend to neglect regional interests. This results in the mushrooming of a multitude of parties, with each one representing the interests of a particular section. Quite naturally

(in accordance with the individual tendency to pursue personal objectives) each section prefers to choose its own representative rather than a party which promotes larger National interests. The verdict of the people then necessitates the formation of a coalition government.

Generally the coalitions are formed on account of one of the following three reasons:

1. No single political party is able to secure a working majority in the popular house on account of the presence of multiparty system. Under the circumstances a number of like-minded political parties form the coalition to provide a workable majority and run the government. France provides a typical example of this type of coalitions.
2. Secondly, in a bi-party system a deadlock may be created due to even balance between two political parties. This may lead to one of the two parties allying itself with a minor group such as neutrals or defectors to tilt the majority in its favour.
3. Thirdly, a coalition may be necessitated by a national crisis when

various political groups may suspend their political strife and collaborate in the general cause of protecting and promoting their National interests. In Britain coalition government was formed to deal with the abnormal conditions during the First World War. The various political parties sunk their differences to give a united fight to the enemies of Britain.

In India the coalition governments have mainly been the result of multiparty system. As sometimes no single political party being unable to muster clear cut majority in the Legislative Assembly the parties are obliged to seek support and cooperation of other groups to form the government. Sometimes coalitions are also formed before the elections and a number of political parties chalk out an agreed programme and contest elections on the basis of the programme from a common platform. This type of arrangement has an obvious advantage in so far as it smoothens the radicalism the parties joining the coalition without in any way affecting the existing image.

Issues of Coalition Governments

There are occasions when particular issues become a focal point of public indignation and agitation. The corruption involved in the alleged payment of commission to secure the contract for guns by the Swedish company Bofors was exposed in the press and Parliament. V P Singh played a crucial role in giving a sharp edge to the fight against this corruption issue and had to resign from the Cabinet headed by Rajiv Gandhi only to mount a fearless attack on the corruption in high places.

In the 1989 Lok Sabha poll, corruption in high places, symbolized by the Bofors deal, became the central theme of the elections. It touched the innermost chord of the electorate. Articulating this issue through the election campaign of 1989, the Janata Dal Government formed under the leadership of V P Singh became the symbol of struggle against corruption. The National Front coalition acquired legitimacy due to its relentless fight against corruption. In this coalition experiment, history repeated itself and dissidents from the Janata Dal led by Chandra Shekhar formed coalition government and his government was destabilized only by the power motivations of dissidents in the Janata Dal.

The breakup of the coalition led by V P Singh is a classic example as to how desperate elements like the Congress opposing the coalition governments' decision to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations, the BJP, which with its pronounced communal stance wanted to settle its score in the issue of Mandir-Masjid controversy in Ajodhya, raised to side track the Mandal issue and Chandra Shekhar who wanted to avenge the election of V P Singh as the leader of the Janata Dal in Parliament in the wake of his total opposition had forged an unholy alliance to destabilize the coalition headed by V P Singh. These are the destabilizing manipulations about which those who run and sustain the coalition government at the Center must remain vigilant.

Kinds of Coalitions Governments

There are several types of coalitions floating in the political systems across the globe down the centuries. The chief among them are as enlisted.

Communal Coalition

As a sequel to the communal frenzy released by the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya by the BJP and its alliance, a coalition government consisting of BJP-Shiv Sena and rebel Congressmen who won the elections and supported the BJP-Shiv Sena combination after elections, came into existence in Maharashtra.

Though the secular forces in Maharashtra secured higher percentage of votes than the BJP-Shiv Sena combine, the rebel Congressmen made the formation of BJP-Shiv Sena coalition in Maharashtra possible.

Secular Coalition

Secular-based political parties like CPI, CPI (M), Congress, RJD, SP, BSP, etc. are among the main players who came forward with secular ideas to form the secular bloc.

Positive Coalition

This is also known as positive alliance, because it is constructive and is formed with the object of pulling down political party in power and also that of providing an alternative government.

Negative Coalition

This is when the parties join and come together just with the object of pulling down the government already in power. It does not take the burden of forming a new government. It does not provide better alternative. Then such a coalition can be destructive or negative coalition.

An Express Coalition

It means a legal, legitimate coalition. It is a legitimate alliance with some group with clear understanding of give and take. In an express coalition the sharing of power is real, substantial and true.

Tacit Coalition

It means implied, secret or internal. In the sense, a tacit coalition is mere understanding with some group without actually mixing with it. In this system the sharing of power is not substantial.

Suggestions

The following suggestions have been made for not just overcoming the pitfalls but also improving the performance of the coalitions:

1. In tune with Shri R Venkataraman, ex-President of India, it is desirable to have a “National Government” which is a government of all talents. It is proposed to devise a system in which there would be adequate participation of all sections rather than the rule of the majority party. It is hoped that such a system could replace confrontational politics by cooperative politics and a true democratic alternative to the present constitution and a proposal of a national executive as an alternative to the present form of parliamentary government, which in turn leads to have coalitions or unstable governments.
2. It is true that parliamentary system is a party government. But the need of the hour is to have bi-party system as it has strengthened the spirit of parliamentary government in UK. In India, this may be possible by making amendment to the Constitution. The opposition is effective always being ready to provide an alternative to party in power, in case government is ousted as a result of passing of no confidence motion.
3. In the periods of crisis, we should form a coalition of national unity. The power has to be vested by constitutional amendment or convention.
4. Regional parties have a major role to play in the national politics of any Country. Hence, it requires that they outgrow their ideologies in the protection and provision of national interest, all of which points towards the enhancement of collective leadership and at the same time care should be taken that the national parties understand and accommodate the regional ones.
5. “Coalitions are of the party, by the party and for the party,” is an internationally accepted cliché. What is needed is that the political parties, national as well as regional, ought to overlook caste, creed, race, region and religion, language, money-muscle power and the like for vote bank and should carve a niche for themselves on value-based issues. In short, politics should be powered by intellect and driven by values.
6. For a healthy coalitional democracy, pre-poll alliance(s) should be considered keeping in the

mind the common goals, policies and programmes of the concerned parties which would go a long way in serving the nation rather than post-poll alliance(s) which are rather opportunistic in nature.

7. Recall system as a public mandate has never been put to use in the Indian Parliamentary democracy. It may be suggested that it could best implemented in case of politicians who are found to be corrupt and/or abuse political power. Further, implementation of Lok Pal Bill may be contemplated in this direction.

Concluding Comments

A democratic government is a trustee of the interests of the entire people including those who oppose and criticize the policies and actions of the government. From this point of view an efficient party system is a *sine qua non* of a Parliamentary democracy. The political party is the engine by which majorities are produced and political power implemented. It becomes the broker between the citizens and their government. The procedures for selecting and qualifying key government personnel and vesting them with the authority to make, execute, supervise and interpret policy are in the hands of the political parties.

Coalition governments are minority governments at the centre which are formed with the alliance of Regional Parties. But Regional Parties unfortunately do not give importance to national interests; as such they do not stand united for the successful working of government.

Endnotes

1. Sahni, Naresh Chandra (Ed.), “*Coalition Politics in India*,” New Academy Publishing Co., Jullundur, 1971.
2. Karunakaran, K. P. (Ed.), “*Coalition Governments in India - Problems and Prospects*,” Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1975.
3. Nanda, Sukadev, “*Coalitional Politics in Orissa*,” Sterling Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1979.
4. Kashyap, C. Subhash (Ed.), “*Coalition Government and Politics in India*,” Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi, 1997.
5. Chander, Prakash (Ed.), “*Coalition Politics in India*,” km\o\ Publications, New Delhi, 2000.
6. Riker, William. H., “*The Theory of Political Coalitions*,” Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1970.
7. Thakurta, Paranjay Guha and Raguraman, Shankar, “*A Time of Coalitions - Divided We Stand*”, SAGE Publication, New Delhi, 2000.
8. Ramsundar, D. (Ed.), “*Coalition Politics in India: Search for Political Stability*,” National Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000.
9. Maheshwari, S. R., ‘*Coalition Government - 1976 Indian Experience: 1946-1996*,’ *Politics in India*, “New Delhi, July 1996, p.23.
10. Sachadeva, S. K. (Ed.), ‘*From Gowda to Gujral and After/ “Competition Success Review”*’, New Delhi, June 1997, Pp.67-73.



To our Contributors.....

& Original articles are welcome.

& Only Original copy of the manuscript, neatly typed in double-space should be sent. Please do not send carbon, cyclo-or photo-copies.

& Please check up grammatical & typographical mistakes before sending. Editor will not be responsible for these lapses.

& Editor reserves the right to reject/ modify / edit an article without assigning any reason.