

Coalition Politics in India

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Introduction:

Coalition building has invariably been an integral part of democratic politics and governance. In its broadest sense, coalition building implies initiation of measures to secure consensus among diverse social groups and communities in the pursuit of a common minimum programme. By this definition, in the competitive environment of democratic society, several agencies including broad mass movements and political parties as well as the governments are constantly involved in building coalitions. When a single political party fails to achieve a clear majority in the legislature, coalition government becomes an authentic mode of managing interactions between legislature and executive. In the process, the executive is able to gather staying power on the basis of winning key votes in the legislature. The politics of coalition as well as the functioning of the multi-party coalition governments have matured and stabilized in the context of several European countries¹. Coalition seems to have become intrinsic to the Indian polity. This chapter concentrates on its evolution in a historical perspective underlining the critical role of the socio-political processes in shaping its nature. Coalition is not merely the coming together of political parties to capture power; it is also reflective of the fragmentation of social interests at the grassroots. The questions that this chapter thus seeks to address are (a) whether coalition is the culmination of a process that might have begun once the Congress Party ceased to become an umbrella organization and (b) whether coalition is a convenient mode of coagulation of parties, regardless of ideology, for capturing power.

Historical roots:

The roots of coalition politics in India can be traced back to the nationalist movement and especially in the Gandhian conceptualization of Swaraj. It is true that the non-western leaders involved in the struggle for liberation were deeply influenced by European nationalist ideas. They were also aware of the limitations of these ideas in the non-European socio-economic context due to their alien origin. So while mobilizing the imagined community for an essentially political cause they began, by the beginning of the twentieth century, to speak in a 'native' vocabulary. Although they drew upon the ideas of European nationalism they indigenized them substantially by discovering or inventing indigenous equivalents and investing these with additional meanings and nuances. This is probably the reason why Gandhi and his colleagues in the anti-British campaign in India preferred Swadeshi² to nationalism. Gandhi avoided the language of nationalism primarily because he was aware that the Congress flirtations with nationalist ideas in the first quarter of the twentieth century frightened away not only the Muslims and other minorities but also some of the Hindu lower castes. This seems the most pragmatic idea one could possibly conceive of in a country such as India that was not united in terms of religion, race, culture and common historical memories of oppression and struggle. Underlying this is the reason why Gandhi and his Congress colleagues preferred 'the relaxed and chaotic plurality of the traditional Indian life to the order and homogeneity of the European nation state [because they realized] that the open, plural and relatively heterogeneous traditional Indian civilization would best unite Indians'³. Drawing on values meaningful to the Indian masses, the Indian freedom struggle developed its own modular forms,

which are characteristically different from that of the west. Although the 1947 Great Divide of the subcontinent of India was articulated in terms of religion, the nationalist language drawing upon the exclusivity of Islam appeared inadequate to sustain Pakistan following the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

As an idea and a strategy, Swaraj gained remarkably in the context of the nationalist articulation of the freedom struggle and the growing democratization of the political processes that had already brought in hitherto socio-politically marginal sections of society. So Swaraj was a great leveller in the sense that it helped mobilize people despite obvious socio-economic and cultural differences. This is what lay at the success of Swaraj as a political strategy. Underlining its role in a highly divided society like India, Swaraj was defined in the following ways: (a) national independence; (b) political freedom of the individual; (c) economic freedom of the individual; (d) spiritual freedom of the individual or self rule. Although these four definitions are about four different characteristics of Swaraj they are nonetheless complementary to each other. Of these, the first three are negative in character whereas the fourth one is positive in its connotation. Swaraj as 'national independence', individual 'political' and 'economic' freedom involves discontinuity of alien rule, absence of exploitation by individuals and poverty respectively. Spiritual freedom is positive in character in the sense that it is a state of being that everyone aspires to actualize once the first three conditions are met. In other words, there is an implicit assumption that self rule is conditional on the absence of the clearly defined negative factors that stood in the way of realizing Swaraj in its undiluted moral sense. Even in his conceptualization, Gandhi preferred the term Swaraj to its English translation presumably because of the difficulty in getting the exact synonym in another language⁴. As the discussion shows, the coalition of forces that Gandhi brought together drew largely on Swaraj, which provided the ideological glue, as it were, to the nationalist campaign. It further demonstrates the importance of a process whereby ideology gets articulated in a particular fashion underlining the significance of India's multicultural socio-economic environment.

Coalition is therefore an ideology of multicultural existence with varied manifestations in different historical phases of Indian history.

Institutional roots of coalition politics in India Coalitions are articulated within an institutional framework. There are two specific ways in which this has been concretized in Indian constitutional laws and practices. The Constitution is illustrative of various devices to create and sustain norms, values and practices that are integral to the multicultural Indian reality despite the fact that it has the imprint of the 1935 imperial Constitution. However, a clear change is visible in the working of the constitutional institutions presumably because of the changing ideological character of the polity in which they function and translate the democratic ethos of the polity in the aftermath of the 1947 transfer of power in India. Despite its imperial roots, the Constitution served a useful purpose in sustaining India's multicultural personality. Second, the prevalent socio-economic context in which the British governmental practices were enmeshed seems to be an important influence in this process. The Constitution's greatest success, as a constitutional expert comments, 'lies below the surface of government. It has provided a framework for social and political development, a rational, institutional basis of political behaviour. It not only establishes the national ideal, more importantly it lays down the rational, institutional manner in which they are to be pursued – a gigantic step for a people committed largely to irrational means of achieving other-worldly goals.⁵' One of the institutional devices borrowed from the British system is the first-past-the-post system, which largely accounts for peculiar electoral outcomes that are favourable for coalition. Under this system, those parties that have a widespread following are disadvantaged in comparison with those whose support is narrowly concentrated. For instance, regional parties with lots of votes in a small number of seats do extremely well compared with those parties whose votes are widely scattered in many constituencies. In this system, a candidate or a party wins by obtaining the largest number of votes. None of the parties that captured power at the union level had ever had majority support at its disposal. The Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress party made history when it obtained 44

per cent of the popular vote. In the last Lok Sabha poll in 2004, the NDA's share was 35.5 per cent while the ruling UPA was just 1 percentage point ahead by obtaining 36.5 per cent of the popular votes. So, it is perfectly plausible to argue that the incumbent ruling authority in New Delhi is not representative at all simply because of the lack of support of the majority. This principle also undermines the democratic processes in a context where coalition seems to be critical in the formation of governments. It is most likely that parties based on ideology that have a widespread base may not succeed while those drawing on regionalism and casteism will perform better because their votes are concentrated in specific constituencies. And in the formation of coalition governments it is the regionalists and casteists who become decisive because they have numbers. The collapse of majority governments and the consolidation of coalition of convenience have thus, warned an analyst, 'promoted casteism, regionalism and communalism'⁶. One possible way out is certainly a system of proportional representation (PR) in which a party can have a presence in the legislature on the basis of its overall popular support, regardless of whether or not the party can win seats on the basis of the largest number of votes⁷. The advantage of the system is that it is more genuinely representative and that it accurately captures the mood of the nation. Small parties with concentrated support will no longer have an unfair advantage.

Besides the first-past-the-post system, the institutional set-up that the Constitution confirmed seems to have contributed to coalition culture presumably because it was based on (a) consensus and (b) the principle of accommodation. The first is a manner of making decisions by 'unanimity' or 'near unanimity'; the latter refers to the ability to reconcile or harmonize. With accommodation, concepts and viewpoints, although seemingly incompatible, stand intact. They are not simply bypassed or entirely ignored, but are worked out simultaneously. Accommodation is therefore a matter of belief and attitude. As explained by a commentator, 'the most notable characteristic in every field of Indian society . . . is the constant attempt to reconcile conflicting views or actions, to discover a workable compromise, to avoid seeing the

human situation in terms of all black or all white'⁸. The Indian constitutional structure is a good example of consensus and accommodation as the proceedings in the Constituent Assembly and the evolution of constitutional practices in independent India clearly demonstrate. The institutional foundation that the Constitution provides was supportive of the Congress system⁹ so long as it remained an umbrella party representing myriad social interests.

The success of the Congress system was attributed to its 'central role in maintaining and restructuring political consensus'. The system continued almost uninterrupted till the 1967 elections when the non-Congress governments came to power in several states, setting a new trend of coalition politics in India. In explaining this phenomenon, a perceptive political analyst argues:

The socio-economic and demographic profile of the polity is changing rather fast. . . . The mobilization of new recruits and groups into the political process . . . has given rise to the development of new and more differentiated identities and patterns of political cleavage. [This gave rise to] the expectation of freer political access . . . and a greater insistence on government performance. Intermediaries and vote banks, while of continuing importance, have become increasingly circumvented as citizens search for more effective participation in the political market place and develop an ability to evaluate and make choice¹⁰.

The breakdown of the federal and coalitional pillars of Congress reinvigorated regional politics. The centralization of power within the party from the early 1970s weakened the regional roots of the party and 'unleashed disastrous potentials'. Regional demands were no longer 'filtered through party channels, but began to be asserted with rising irritation against the centre'. Initially these demands were confined to those endorsing their identities as distinct socio-cultural entities in the polity; but later they were articulated as demands for 'full scale autonomy and separatism', as evident in Punjab and Kashmir. So, centralization and neglect of federal channels 'incited strident regionalism; the substitution of a "national" electorate and the redefinition of democracy forced Congress into inviting local identities into the national arena, which worked to the advantage of those who

claimed to represent more directly and intimately these groupings of religion and caste¹¹. It was not therefore surprising that by the 1996 national poll there were as many as twenty-eight different parties with strong regional roots. Asserting their regional identities, these parties left significant marks on the national scene. Economic reforms initiated in 1991 by the minority Congress government of Narasimha Rao assigned 'greater powers to regional governments and provoked greater competition for control over them'. The intensity of political competition 'produced a generation of regional leaders with remarkable skills' and ability to resort to novel ways of flattering 'popular cultural sensibilities'¹². In fact, the success of the erstwhile Bihar chief minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav, is largely attributed to his capacity to sway the masses by clinging to local dialects and illustrations that are meaningful to the people at the grassroots.

There is no doubt that India's politico-constitutional structure has undergone tremendous changes to adapt to changing circumstances. Parliament continues to remain, at least constitutionally, supreme though the constituent states have become more powerful than before¹³. Under the changed circumstances, what is evident is a clear shift of emphasis from the Westminster to the federal tradition, more so in the era of coalition politics when no single political party has an absolute majority in parliament. For practical purposes, the scheme the framers had adopted to bring together diverse Indian states within a single authority was what is known as 'executive federalism' – a structure of division of powers between different layers of governmental authorities following a clearly defined guidelines in the form of 'Union', 'State' and 'Concurrent' lists in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India. From compulsions of circumstances arising out of coalition politics, the constituent states do not remain mere instruments of the Union; their importance is increasingly being felt in what was earlier known as 'the exclusive' domain of the centre. A process seems to have begun towards 'legislative federalism', in which the upper chamber representing the units of the federal government is as powerful as the lower chamber. Drawing upon American federalism, in which the Senate holds

substantial power in conjunction with the House of Representatives, legislative federalism is an arrangement based on an equal and effective representation of the regions. The decisions, taken at the Union level, appear to be both democratic and representative given the role of both the chambers in their articulation. In other words, legislative federalism in its proper manifestation guarantees the importance of both the chambers in the decision-making process, which no longer remains 'exclusive' territory of the Lower House for its definite representative character. Not only will the upper chamber be an effective forum for the regions; its role in the legislative process will also be significant and substantial. If properly constituted, it could be an institution that represented the regions as such, counterbalancing the principle of representation by population on which the Lower House is based. It will also be a real break with the past since India's politico-constitutional structure draws upon the Westminster model with a strong centre associated with unitary government.

The expansion of political participation in the last two decades has placed historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups at the centre of the political system and governance at all levels. The rapid politicization and accelerated participation of groups such as other backward classes (OBCs) and Dalits raises questions about inclusion, exclusion, varied patterns of empowerment and the impact of these last on the growth and consolidation of democracy¹⁴. One aspect of these changes has to do with the processes and strategies that have inspired the induction of marginal groups into the political decision-making process. The rise of coalition governments is thus a manifestation of the widening and deepening of democracy in India. Different regions and different social groups have acquired a greater stake in the system, with parties that seek to represent them winning an increasing number of seats, usually at the cost of Congress, which no longer remains truly a national party. Though not unique in India, these significant political changes, reflective also of social churning, have overshadowed the idioms and ideologies that dominated and sustained the post-colonial agenda of social transformation in the post-colonial world. Many of these are also expressions of discontent

traceable to the anger of the subalterns against an elite that has cornered the benefits and privileges of post-colonial economic development; these changes have significantly reformulated the political terrain.

Coming together syndrome in Indian politics:

The evolution of alliances began in 1967 in various Indian provinces with the formation of coalition governments by the parties opposed to the Congress. Inspired by Rammanohar Lohia¹⁵, several parties formed coalitions that drew primarily, if not exclusively, on anti-Congress sentiments. Lohia was emphatic in his belief that a continued alliance among the parties would enable them to come closer despite being ideologically dissimilar. A question was raised whether an opposition consisting of parties like Swatantra and Jana Sangh at one end and the communists at the other could ever govern. Given a clear ideological demarcation among them, the scepticism about their viability as a group did not appear to be unfounded. In response to this charge, Lohia argued: how could 'a motley Congress' with Krishna Menon at one end and S. K. Patil at the other remain united? Presumably because the Congress despite its diversities and contradictions had 'inherited the habit of working together and shared loyalty to the Nehru-Gandhi family'. Although doubt persisted in his mind about the feasibility of anti-Congress parties, Lohia found in attempts at opposition unity a creative political process seeking to relocate the non-Congress parties as well. As he argued, 'such a combination might not achieve anything spectacular but it would at least inspire the confidence that the country could get rid of the Congress rule at the Centre'¹⁶. Despite being ephemeral, the non-Congress governments that captured power in 1967 in nine states rewrote history by replacing the Congress Party in the provinces. This was the beginning of an era of 'non-Congressism' that had not fully blossomed presumably because of the lack of a well-knit organizational network of the opposition parties across the length and breadth of the country. Notwithstanding the organizational weaknesses, the anti-Congress coalitions, known as Samyukta Vidhayak Dal, formed governments in a majority of the states following the 1967 assembly elections. The euphoria over the formation of non-Congress

governments was short-lived with the quick disintegration of these governments presumably because of a lack of ideological and programmatic compatibility. The untimely death of Lohia also left a void as there was no comparable figure that could carve out another grand coalition of the opposition parties. The subsequent split in the Congress Party, the 1971 war with Pakistan and the 1975-77 Emergency greatly retarded the opposition consolidation in the forthcoming decades¹⁷.

Indian politics had undergone a paradigmatic shift on the eve of the 1977 national elections, which replaced the Congress party by a loose-knit Janata coalition representing diverse, if not contradictory, interests. During the brief interlude of the Janata regime (1977-80), probably because of other preoccupations of the regime, no serious attempt was made to counter the centripetal tendencies that had, by then, firm roots in Indian politics. Indira Gandhi's style of functioning completely destroyed internal democracy within the Congress Party. With the disintegration of provincial Congress organizations, the state leaders became mere clients of the central organ of the party. As she became the key to political power and personal gain, there was hardly any challenge to her leadership and the party was reduced to almost a nonentity. The consequence was disastrous. The state tended to ignore the demands of the constituent units and favoured concentration of power simply because those who mattered in political decision-making neither questioned centralization nor endeavoured to provide an alternative.

Stable pan-Indian coalitions:

Trends and patterns The first real coalition at the level of the Union government was formed in 1977, three decades after independence, when the Janata Party came to power. A coalition of several pre-poll allies, the Janata Party consolidated the alliance on the issue of opposition to the 1975-77 Emergency, imposed by the erstwhile Indira Gandhi-led Congress regime. In view of intra-party rivalry, the Janata government collapsed within two and a half years of its inception and Congress swept back to power in the 1980 national poll. The next coalition government at the Union level was formed in 1989 by the Janata Dal, led by V. P. Singh, a

former Congressman who defected from the party because of his disagreement with its leader, Rajiv Gandhi. A no-confidence motion in the Lower House knocked the government from power and was followed by a breakaway group of the Janata Dal, known as the Janata Dal (Samajwadi), forming a government with outside support from Congress, which was the single largest party in Lok Sabha. After the May 1996 elections, which followed the end of Narasimha Rao's tenure, India saw four coalition governments that also did not last the full term of the eleventh Lok Sabha. Led by the BJP, the first of these four coalition governments lasted for only thirteen days once it was clear that the government would lose the vote of no confidence on the floor of the house. This was followed by the United Front government under the stewardship of H. D. Dave Gowda and was supported by the Congress. The United Front was a post-poll conglomeration of thirteen parties. Congress threatened to withdraw support from the United Front government unless the incumbent premier was replaced because of his failure to amicably settle 'inter-state disputes' over Cauvery water. This led to the formation of another Congress-supported United Front government, which elected I. K. Gujral as its premier. With its collapse following the withdrawal of Congress support, a mid-term election was announced in February–March 1998. This election was distinct in India's recent political history for two important reasons: (a) the BJP secured pre-poll tie-ups with as many as thirteen big and small regional parties spread over nine major Indian states; (b) the BJP was drawn to the coalitional strategy because of its failure to sustain beyond thirteen days in 1996 due to lack of numerical support in the lower house. As the election results show, this strategy worked favourably for the BJP, which emerged as the single largest party in the twelfth Lok Sabha in 1998 with 182 seats. With its electoral allies, it had 258, still falling short of the halfway mark of 272. Since it was the largest conglomeration of parties, the alliance was invited by the president to form the government at the Union level. Nonetheless, the alliance never became stable, with one partner or another threatening to quit the coalition at frequent intervals. Its fate was sealed following the withdrawal of the AIADMK, though the rest of the

partners of the BJP-led coalition remained together. So the fourth coalition government met the same fate as the others in just over two years. Although these four different experiments of coalition government at the Union level failed because they did not last full terms, they nonetheless are indicative of significant changes in India's political landscape. From now on, not only the BJP but also its competitor, Congress, favoured pre-poll alignment with partners even, on occasions, by underplaying the ideological compatibility when selecting allies.

The thirteenth general election, held in September–October 1999, was a watershed in India's recent political history for at least two reasons: first, for the first time, a pre-electoral alliance – the National Democratic Alliance – was able to win a majority in the Lok Sabha. Although the BJP lost 2 per cent of its share of the popular votes, its earlier tally of 182 seats in the Lok Sabha remained intact. Contrarily, the Congress share of votes had gone up by 3 per cent, though it lost thirty seats presumably because of the 'first-past-the-post' principle of election. Formed in 1999, the BJP-led NDA, which completed its term of five years, clearly shows the viability and strength of a mega-political formation across the country. With the formation of another coalition government at the centre following the 2004 election to the Lok Sabha, the trend that began in 1999 appears to have continued. Led by Congress, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government is constituted by regional and state-based parties with outside support from the left parties and Samajwadi Party. What accounts for the rise of coalition government is the failure of the pan-Indian parties to secure a majority in parliament on their own. The reasons are complex and rooted in the radical social churning at the grassroots. Nonetheless, the idea of coalition has historical roots in India. The National Congress was, for instance, a grand social coalition under Gandhi's stewardship and reaped rich electoral dividends till the fourth general elections in 1967. During the regime with Mrs Indira Gandhi at the helm, the trend seems to have discontinued and she steered India to what is conceptually identified as 'plebiscitary' politics, which turned out to be the nemesis of the Congress party. Though efforts at conjuring up a political coalition at the national level were made from the

days of the Janata Party and followed by various 'fronts' led by the Janata Dal (in 1989, 1996 and 1997), the BJP is perhaps the first political party to have understood the importance of creating a nationwide political coalition. Ideological disagreements with the BJP apart, the party must be given its due in seriously attempting power-sharing with diverse allies. Illustrative of this is the gradual expansion of the NDA from an eighteen-party coalition to a twenty-fourparty broad-based coalition.

The 2004 national poll is similar to the 1999 Lok Sabha election in at least one way. Both the pan-Indian parties – BJP and Congress – have failed to secure a majority and hence are unable to form a government at the centre on their own. The obvious upshot of such poll outcomes is the importance of the regional and state-based parties in providing the magic number to the parties seeking to constitute the government. These splinter parties have become an integral part of governance in view of the changing complexion of the parliament, which is no longer dominated by a single party. There has been a fundamental change in the role of parliament since the emergence of multi-party coalitions as 'a regular form of government' in India. What has changed in recent years is that the majority of members providing numerical support to the government belong to a large number of parties, inside and outside the ruling coalition. The survival of the government depends on the support of one or more parties which have different ideologies and different support bases. Several of them, while united at the Centre, are deeply divided at the regional and state levels¹⁸. The dependence of the government on the support of parties that are otherwise opposed to it has had several unintended consequences for the functioning of Parliament and other vital pillars of India's democracy. The ruling coalition may not always be free to adopt policies in accordance with its priorities unless there is a consensus among the partners that are critical for its survival. An important consequence of this is the growing importance of 'behind the scenes' agreements among different sets of party leaders, both within and outside the government. So long as the government enjoys the backing of leaders with majority support, there is no threat to its continuity

and it can get parliament to do whatever it proposes to do¹⁹.

One of the factors that contributed to the rise of these smaller parties is certainly the breakdown of Congress and also its failure to represent the myriad social and economic interests at the grassroots. So, political coalition, at the level of government formation, seeks to articulate the neglected voice by bringing in to the centre stage those parties which are not exactly 'centrist'. In this sense, coalition is a great leveller of interests. With their crucial role in the government for its performance and continuity, these parties with limited geographic spread also forced the bigger parties to redefine their roles in the changed socio-economic and political reality. So coalition is not merely a cementing device; it has also ushered in a new era of constant dialogues among those competing for power regardless of size and depth of organization.

The definite decline of the national parties is also indicative of their failure to effectively address issues of contradictory social classes. In most cases, regional parties are constituted with specific socio-economic agenda. In other words, these are political formations drawing on specific social and economic interests that largely remain unrepresented. They thus are not only useful in involving the hitherto neglected sections in the democratic processes, but also change the nature of the political by redefining its contour. So, political coalition at the centre draws on the social coalition at the grassroots. Regional parties representing various kinds of social coalition seem to provide a link between the national and the local. Given their crucial role in the continuity of the government in power, they cannot be ignored, let alone wished away. Hence, the socio-political and economic issues relevant to those sections of society they represent are likely to be important in so far as policies at the national level are concerned. In this sense, the regional parties act as an ideological bloc according 'corrective steps', as it were, to the national government by providing a correct perspective to the governmental policies and programmes. So, coalition is a grand opportunity for the national decision makers to adopt socially meaningful and economically ameliorating programmes in view of the inputs from the grassroots that are possible thanks largely to the

involvement of the regional and state-based political actors.

Both the thirteenth and fourteenth elections to the national parliament seem to have set a pattern shaping the outcome of the poll and thus the nature of the government. Because coalition is organically constituted in India in the sense that a complex social coalition leads to a political coalition, there is no doubt that the days of the single party majority are gone. The reversal of the trend is simply inconceivable because of a serious social churning at the grassroots involving marginalized sections of Indian society. Not only are these socially peripheral and economically backward sections significant players in political choice, they are represented by organized parties with well-entrenched networks of support certainly in one, if not more states. So, coalition government is not merely an arrangement based on ad hoc political alliances; it is perhaps inevitable given the radical socio-economic changes in rural India since the late 1980s. The former NDA government and its successor under the aegis of the UPA are illustrative, though ideological affinity may not always have acted in cementing the bond among the constituents of the coalition. But, once a part of the government, the coalition partners regardless of their numerical strength remain important forces that can be wished away only at the peril of the government. Hence coalition creates a situation whereby the government, in order to avoid threats to its existence, is forced to accept the constituent regional parties as 'equal partners' and not merely appendages to the party/parties leading the coalition because of their numerical might. By accepting coalition as inevitable, political parties competing for power at both the national and state levels are also involved in a critical way in a process whereby the India's political system and its ideological contours are being dramatically altered and thus redefined.

Despite the commonly held views of the Indian political experience as a single dominant party system splintering into a multi-party coalition, the modern Indian polity has thus emerged as an example of coalition politics par excellence. Not only was the single dominant party a social as well as ideological coalition, even the cabinet government in the initial years was constituted on coalition

principles. It is important to remember that the bulk of the Indian party system has emerged owing to a gradual erosion of this coalition. It reached its peak in 1967 when, as an impact of this erosion, political coalition emerged at the state level as well. The decades of the 1970s and 1980s witnessed experiments by the Indian electorate with coalition and one-party rule. Indira Gandhi transformed Congress from a coalition of groups into a centralized party absolutely under her control.

The 1990s were a decade of slowly but surely nurturing coalition culture in India. Despite the red herring drawn by the advocates of stability across the path of conglomerating coalition, the completion of a five-year term by the NDA and the assumption of power by the UPA have established beyond doubt the prospects of a stable government even under a coalition of parties. Though it is impossible to play down principles, the patterns and priorities of making or sustaining coalitions anywhere and in any situation are governed by perceived political convenience and expediency. The emerging patterns of coalescence in a society provide insights into weaknesses that lead to unstable political coalition.

Apart from centrism as a binding force in any conglomeration of parties, there are certain other factors that are peculiar to the articulation of coalition in India as a conceptual category. In other words, the formation of coalition governments is premised on certain distinctive characteristics of the Indian socio-political reality that appear to have informed the theoretical search concerning this phenomenon. Prominent among these are as follows:

Coalition is a region-dictated political phenomenon. Despite being ideologically heterogeneous, regional parties agree to come together on the basis of programmatic compatibility. As illustrated by the NDA, the regional parties had a significant say in its consolidation and continuity at the centre. What brought them together was a common minimum programme. Even in the formation of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) after the fourteenth Lok Sabha poll in 2004, the cementing factor is undoubtedly a common minimum programme in which the regional parties had significant inputs. Seeking to accord constitutional sanctity, the post-election fourteen-

party United Front (1996–97), for instance, formulated a common minimum programme committed to the principles of political, administrative and economic federalism. In pursuit of this goal, the programme suggested a dual strategy: (a) true to its commitment, the Front proposed to implement the major recommendations of the 1984 Sarkaria Commission to ensure greater autonomy to the states to enable them to determine their own plan priorities within the framework of the national five-year plans; and (b) the United Front government also promised to appoint a powerful committee to review and update the recommendations of the Commission and to examine the devolution of financial powers to the state governments.

The 1989 poll outcome reveals the extent to which the patterns of electoral response became increasingly ‘regionalized’ and ‘fragmented’. The Mandal recommendations²⁰ have also contributed to the regionalization of Indian politics by utilizing the region-specific caste configurations of those belonging to the OBCs. The pattern remained unchanged in the 1996 elections. As an observer comments, ‘there is no nationwide wave for or against any political combine. Yet, there are mini-waves at the local level which are dominated by local issues as in the case of Tamil Nadu, Bihar, West Bengal or Madhya Pradesh²¹’. The formation of the United Front government at the centre in 1996 clearly demonstrated that the regionalization of the Indian polity even at the national level was now a reality. The Indian parliament formed in 1996 contained twenty-eight different parties, more than ever before, with roots in the regions. Following the breakdown of the federal and coalitional pillars of Congress, ‘the proliferating regional parties had set their own stamp on the national political imagination’²². Given the strong roots of the constituents of the Front in the regions, it is therefore necessary to take into account the ‘state’ and ‘region-specific issues’. For example, the decline of the Janata Dal, an important constituent of the first Third Front government at the centre, was possibly due to withdrawal of support of ‘regional lords’ such as Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav and Naveen Pattanaik who carved out an unassailable position in UP, Bihar and Orissa

respectively. Their electoral victory can be attributed to their success in building up winning caste coalitions of demographically preponderant castes (Yadavs in UP and Bihar and Karans in Orissa), Muslims and Dalits. The social constituency for the third force had therefore clearly expanded, but it remained ‘fractured and divided between diverse regional and sectional parties’²³. So, coalition is also an articulation of a process of an increasing fragmentation of the party system along regional and ethnic lines that is linked with a process of ‘creolization’ or ‘vernacularization’ of Indian politics seeking ‘to develop shared protocols with the preexisting language of the people’²⁴. In other words, the influx of lower orders into the field of democratic contestation has radically altered the vocabulary of this contestation, for the new entrants brought with them their beliefs as well. For the first time, ‘the borrowed high ideological spectrum’ was disturbed by ‘homespun ideological fragments’. The raw narratives of ‘social justice’, articulated by Kanshi Ram or Laloo Prasad Yadav and Mayawati, achieved what Lohia’s sophisticated philosophy of history failed to do three decades earlier, namely, ‘to make it respectable to talk about caste in the public-political domain’²⁵.

This situation – the growing fragmentation of political parties as well as the changing nature of their support base – has been theoretically conceptualized by Alfred Stepan in a twofold classification of parties of (a) polity wide and (b) centric-regional parties²⁶. The polity wide parties are ones with a strong organizational, electoral and emotional presence in all, or virtually all, the member units of a federation whereas the centric-regional parties are those that receive almost all their votes in one unit or geographic space in the federation. If the political system is parliamentary, the centric-regional parties provide adequate numerical support to a polity wide party to form a government in which they are both crucial and decisive. The growing importance of these centric-regional parties in the governing coalitions at the centre in India also suggests the increasing regionalization of the parties that owe their sustenance, if not existence, to the regions. In interpreting India’s coalition experience, which is long and rich at the state level, it is theoretically

important to underline that the regional parties have gained massive salience at the national level presumably because of the relative decline of the polity wide parties. The centric-regional parties have prospered more than the so-called national parties, indicating a process, perhaps nebulous now, highlighting their invincible role in forming coalitions. They cannot be ignored simply because the pan-Indian parties no longer represent the centrist space in Indian politics in its entirety, which the Congress did because of the success in accommodating diverse regional interests. The quick disintegration of the pre-NDA coalitions since the 1977 Morarji Desai government was always highlighted to argue that these experiments, though reflecting the intense democratic churning at the grassroots, failed to generate confidence in their governance capability. They were 'stigmatized by their opponents as dominated by regional leaders preoccupied with regional interests, and the sceptre of disintegration was freely brandished'²⁷. Those who are critical of the rise of regional parties as integral to national coalitions tend to argue that 'the entire ethos of regional parties is to magnify local interests and ignore those of the rest of the country. So, far from creating a happier country, the rise of regional parties could spell more tensions'²⁸. Given the NDA's success in completing the term of five years, the argument seems to have lost its viability and there is hardly scope for scepticism because of the evolution of a healthy coalition culture, based on a creative interaction among the constituents on the basis of a common minimum programme.

Notes and References:

1. Of the successful experiments, the Olive Tree coalition in Italy on the basis of a compromise between the Catholic Church and the Communists was possible once the contentious issues were swept under the carpet. In Germany, the Christian Democratic Party and Social Democratic Party continue to remain important ingredients in the coalition government. Switzerland is another successful experiment in coalition government seeking to merge the interests of the three major language groups (French, German and Italian). Outside Europe, Israel is perhaps the best example of power-sharing and a Prime Minister by rotation. Israel had a coalition government of the Likud Party and Labour Party from 1984 to 1988. For the first two years, Shimon Peres was the premier and

Yitzhak Shamir the Foreign Minister, followed by a reversal of roles in the next two years. The Israel example was suggested when the National Front came to power in India in 1989.

2. *Swadeshi* is an Indian expression, popularized and loaded with meaning in the course of the freedom struggle. It means (a) collective pride, (b) ancestral loyalty and (c) communal integrity or amity.
3. Bhikhu Parekh, 'Ethnocentricity of the nationalist discourse', *Nations and Nationalism*, 1 (1), 1995, p. 39.
4. Gandhi defined Swaraj as separate from 'freedom' and 'independence', which he claimed 'were English words lacking such connotations and which could be taken to mean a license to do whatever one wishes'. His Swaraj 'allowed no such irresponsible freedom and demanded rather a rigorous moulding of the self and a heavy sense of responsibility'. David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003, p. 26.
5. Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 309-10.
6. Vir Sanghvi, 'Neither fair nor stable', *Hindustan Times*, 25 March 2007.
7. Jayaprakash Narayan, 'The crisis of governance', in Rajesh Tandon and Ranjita Mohanty (eds), *Does Civil Society Matter: Governance in Contemporary India*, New Delhi: Sage, 2005 (reprint), p. 101.
8. Austin, *The Indian Constitution*, p. 318.
9. Built as it was around a system of one-party dominance, the Congress system allowed a great deal of internal flexibility and a long period of stable democratic functioning defused tension within the organization, which accounted for its survival for more than four decades after independence. For details, see Rajni Kothari, 'The Congress System in India', *Asian Survey*, December 1964.
10. Rajni Kothari, 'Continuity and change in the Indian party system', *Asian Survey*, November 1970, p. 939.
11. Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 184.
12. Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 57.
13. For details of this argument, see Lawrence Saez, *Federalism without a Centre: The Impact of Political and Economic Reform on India's Federal System*, New Delhi: Sage, 2002.
14. Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of Low Castes in North Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003.
15. Rammanohar Lohia's political vision was articulated in saptakranti (revolutions for seven goals), which consists of revolutions (1) for man-woman equality, (2) against inequality based on colour, (3) against social inequality and caste and for special opportunities, (4) against colonialism and foreign rule, (5) for maximum achievable economic equality, (6) for privacy and democratic rights and (7) against weapons 232 Notes of mass destruction. Rammanohar Lohia, *Election Manifesto of the Socialist Party*, 1962, p. 3 - quoted in Madhu Limaye, *Janata Party Experiment: An Insider's*

- Account of Opposition Politics, 1977–80*, Vol. 2, New Delhi: DK Publishers, 1994, p. 543.
16. Rammanohar Lohia, *Note and Comments, the Elections, 1967 and After*, Vol. 2, pp. 247–52, quoted in Madhu Limaye, *Janata Party Experiment*, Vol. 2, p. 542.
17. Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of India's Emergency*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003.
18. The Left Front parties, for instance, oppose the Congress in states such as Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura where they are the governing coalitions though they are a critical part of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance at the centre.
19. For a definite account of the changing nature of parliament, see Bimal Jalan, *India's Politics: A View from the Backbench*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2007, p. 27.
20. The Second Backward Classes Commission, known as the Mandal Commission, appointed in 1978, revived interest in formulating a national policy for OBCs. The Commission suggested that OBCs, who form 54.5 per cent of the country's population, require special concession to correct the social imbalance. As is evident, the Mandal formula rests on two premises: (a) the OBCs comprise a very large segment of India's population and (b) their representation (only 5 per cent) in the public sector is abysmally poor. Hence the recommendations ensuring 27 per cent reservations in central jobs and education for the OBCs appear revolutionary.
21. Padmanand Jha, 'An election without an issue', *Outlook*, 1 May 1996, p. 4.
22. Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 57.
23. Stuart Corbridge and John Harris, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 133.
24. Yogendra Yadav, 'Politics', in Marshall Bouton and Phillip Oldenburg (eds), *Indian Briefing: A Transformative Fifty Years*, Delhi: Mudrit, 2001, p. 38.
25. Yogendra Yadav, 'Electoral politics in the time of change: India's third electoral system, 1989–1999', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21–28 August/3 September 1999, p. 2397.
26. Alfred Stepan, 'Federalism, multi-national states and democracy: a theoretical framework, the Indian model and a Tamil case study', in K. Shankar Bajpai (ed.), *Democracy and Diversity: India and the American Experience*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 240–4.
27. Balveer Arora, 'Negotiating differences: federal coalitions and national cohesion', in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava and Balveer Arora (eds), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 191.
28. 'Unity in unhappiness', editorial, *The Economic Times*, 13 August 1996.

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