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Political Alliance and its Impact on the Indian Politics

Mushtaq Ahmad Wani

Lecturer, Govt. Degree College, India

Firdose Ahmad Wani

Lecturer, Govt. Degree College, India

Abstract:

Alliances in India have become an inevitable and indispensable part of the national and regional politics in the present scenario. India has been experimenting with various Political Alliances at the national level since the last three decades. With the decline of the Congress party and one-party dominant system and with the emergence of various new political parties at various levels, the Alliances have gradually assumed a lot of significance in Indian political system. Alliances have been constructed for the purpose of forming government and also to oppose and depose the existing governments. Political Alliances have been formed before the elections and also after the elections depending on the demands of the circumstances. With the coalition many national and regional political parties are indulged in party politics. Every political party wants have its say in the policy making, decision making and policy implementation. The large scale bargaining power is realized in Alliance politics.

The present research paper attempts to understand and analyse political alliance developed in the Indian politics. After 1989 the like minded political parties are holding discussions to come to power. India has entered a phase of coalition politics. It appears that coalition governments will be natural phenomenon in India in the years to come.

Keywords: *ideologies, demoralized, accommodative, Grass root, Forward Bloc, animosity, motivations, berths, durability, temptation, clustered alliances*

The multi-party coalitions formed since 1990's in India are regarded as a kind of accommodative politics with all varieties of parties coming together in broad coalitions with national parties. Party system in India at the national level since 1998 has been loosely bipolar divided between the Bharatiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition and the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition. In the history of contemporary India, one of the great events had been the ability of 24 party NDA headed by BJP to govern for the entire elected term of 5 years i.e., from 1999 to 2004. This has set a new agenda for governance and has challenged the hypothesis that the coalitions are usually unstable. UPA was formed soon after the 14th Lok Sabha elections in 2004. This alliance is given the external support from the left front consisting of the four main leftist parties. The completion of full term coalition by the NDA and the likelihood of the UPA also of completing its term have made the Indian coalition system appear as the only alternative available to Indian democracy. Naturally, the study and analysis of two major models of governance headed by a Hindu nationalist party (BJP) and secularism professing party (Congress) highlights the techniques and strategies required for the effective operation of coalition.

Although political alliances do not enjoy much respectability even today, Indian politics was always dominated by them. Indian national congress, which rose as a political party in 1880s, started acquiring the shape of an alliance very soon. In its struggle with the colonial rule, the congress welcomed everyone to its fold and functioned as an alliance where the constituents enjoyed a great deal of operational freedom. At the centre when congress lost its alliance character and became weak, Indira Gandhi had to forge legislative alliance with CPI, DMK and other regional parties to sustain her government in power after the split of 1969. Incidentally, Indira Gandhi was herself responsible for changing the nature of congress from an alliance to an integrated party due to which many groups left the congress.

Before the 1971 general elections, four opposition parties formed National Democratic Front, popularly known as grand alliance with the only motive of removing Indira Gandhi from the power. The alliance, however, failed in its aim and disintegrated very soon. A more comprehensive and successful alliance was formed in 1977 when five parties merged and gave birth to an assimilative alliance known as Janata party. Many assimilative and non-assimilative alliances were formed during the next decade including the national democratic alliance and the united front of 1983-84. In 1989, Janata dal which itself was an assimilative alliance, formed a non-assimilative alliance with the BJP and the left front and displaced congress party from the power. In 1996, after the eleventh general elections, India entered into a new phase of alliance politics which is likely to persist in the foreseeable future. In some states like west Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, alliances have gained maturity as well as a wider acceptability.¹

Alliance as a product of political parties has seriously influenced Indian politics. Its impact on political parties has been so overwhelming that the latter are facing threats to their independent existence. Alliance have also arrogated most of the functions of the catch all parties and have in fact proved more integrative as well as effective. The political parties are, therefore, experiencing drastic changes in their nature and functioning. Major impacts are seen below:-

Most of the alliances are not based on ideological considerations in India. They suffer from policy incoherence which has been a leading cause of their failure. Alliance also produces identical policies which confuse the voters. Chander Babu Naidu says, "in 1998, TDP performed poorly because voters equated UF with a congress B team".² Many alliances were based on negative planks like anti-Congressism or anti-BJPism. The grand alliance of 1971, for example failed because it was devoid of any programmatic understanding and was conceived negatively by aiming against one person as a single point programme of Indira hatao.³ It was true in 1990s as well. Samata leader Nitish Kumar says, "I am biggest opponent of BJP but in Bihar they are amongst anti-Laloo forces. So enemy's enemy is a friend, there is no communal secular divide". Similar feelings were expressed by Kanshi Ram towards BJP with which party, the BSP had an alliance in Uttar Pradesh. He called the BJP as 'a cobra with open fang ready to strike any moment'. The impact of these ideological contradictions was adverse on the electorate. The voter could know only whom he voted for but not what he voted for.⁴

In India alliance have moderated the extreme ideologies of political parties, they have also provided proper channels of expression to the marginal political groups. Now the people of North-Eastern India are participating in the government of the country which could never been possible without the existence of political alliance. The BJP which consolidated itself on the agenda of Hindutva, fought the 1999 elections on the twin slogans of stability and good governance. Even in 1996 elections itself it had toned down its Hindutva rhetoric, in 1998 it was further relegated to background.⁵ Secular allies like TDP, DMK and Samata have successfully depoliticized some of its crucial agenda and it has dropped most of its controversial planks at least temporarily. In March 2002, the BJP came under tremendous pressure from its support base to allow religious ceremony at the disputed place (Ram Janma Bhoomi-Babri Masjid) at Ayodhya but it did not allow that saying it was bound by the secular agenda of the NDA. Likewise, communist parties have been ruling Kerala and West Bengal for past several years yet they have not been able to implement even a single measure which could be called Marxist in the true sense or which is not implemented elsewhere by other parties like the congress (I). The parties like DMK or SAD have even desisted from demanding more autonomy to the states. The compulsions of the alliance politics are such that even ideologically discordant alliances start acquiring a moderate leaning.⁶

Similarly, the alliances have downgraded the importance of ideology so much that it has become futile to analyze the present day politics in terms of ideologies. This is because the politicians have given a go by to ideologies and decade old associations in search of winnable partners. During 1998 Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu, DMK leader Karunanidhi said that DMKs self respect was at stake. He pointed out that AIADMK-BJP alliance posed a challenge to the ideology of E.V. Ramaswamy and C.N. Annadurar, the founder of Dravidian movement which has secularism as its main ideological plank. He also alleged that Jayalalita was sowing the seeds of communalism in Tamil Nadu. A year later DMK itself became the chief ally of BJP. Further, alliances necessitate pragmatism and there is hardly any difference between the policies of two rival alliances when they form the government. Alliances invariably move or lean towards the centre irrespective of the ideological mooring of their constituents. They have, therefore, de-ideologised the politics and an ideological confusion has become the prevalent phenomenon. Similarly in the ideologies of different alliances has created a situation where the voters are not able to differentiate between two competing alliances on the basis of their ideology. As the parties ally with opposite or contradictory ideologies, their image and credibility become questionable in the eyes of their supporters.⁷

Further, the political alliances have brought realism to Indian politics which was marked by idealism for a long time. Many parties operated at the periphery in the past with their impracticable ideologies. Now almost all political parties adopt pragmatic programmes so as to be a partner of a possible governing alliance. The BJP remained only a marginal player since the days of Jan Sangh because of its idealist views which were not acceptable to other parties. It was treated as a political untouchable till it changed its stance on some of the objectionable issues in 1990s. The CPI(M), DMK, AIADMK, AGP and SAD all have given up their unrealistic demands for the sake of sharing power with others. At present, the BSP is the only national party which is still harping on its dogmatic political concepts and consequently depriving itself of the possible gain of political power which an alliance can accrue. Already it has made certain modifications. After having failed to rally the entire Bahujan votes behind it, the party gave ticket to as many ten upper caste candidates during the 1996 parliamentary elections. This was a significant sign of the developing realism within the BSP whose most famous slogan was Tilak, Taraju Aur Talwar, Inko Maro Jute Char, i.e., the Brahmins, Vaishyas and Kshatriyas should be beaten with shoes. It is now trying to build a social alliance of different castes and communities. During the 2002 assembly elections for Uttar Pradesh, the party gave 91 tickets to upper castes and 86 to Muslims. As a result out of the 99 successful candidates only 18 belongs to the Dalit castes, the original support base of the BSP. It is, therefore, diluting its previous ideological stance and moving towards alliance politics.⁸

If alliance has damaged the image of some parties, they have also improved the credibility of a few. The BJP which was seen as a communal party till recently, have acquired some acceptability among the Muslims due to its alliance with the secular parties like TDP, DMK and the National Conference. It could poll 6.8% Muslim votes in 1999 general elections because of its alliance with such secular parties.⁹ A senior BJP leader says, "now we have a congressman not only accepting us but also sharing the political platform with us. They have removed the stain of untouchability from us". Similarly the Akalis are no longer seen as separatist since they have allied themselves with a fiercely nationalist BJP nor is the DMK anti-Brahmin anymore. Alliance have also helped the parties to widen their bases beyond their strongholds. BJP could reach Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and the North-East with the help of alliances only. More importantly the alliances in India succeeded in what the political parties failed to achieve individually for a long time.

They provided an alternative to the congress party not only at the centre but also in many states. The most outstanding achievement of the alliance in India appeared in 1977 when an authoritative regime which imposed emergency on the nation by misusing some provisions of the constitution for perpetuating itself in power, was dislodged by alliance. During the past decade, the hegemony of the congress party has been seriously weakened by alliance throughout the country so much so that it has ceased to exist although in many states. It fought election as a junior partner of BSP for the Uttar Pradesh assembly in 1996 and allotted less than 30% seats in that state. Similarly, it had to play a second fiddle to AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and RJD in Bihar due to its alliance with those parties.¹⁰

The contention that the greater the number of partner, the shorter the life of the coalition, will not hold true if the coalition is based on some alliance. Most of the durable alliance in India has more than 5-6 parties as constituents (see table). Durability of an alliance is not influenced by the number of its constituents. An alliance of a large number of parties may look an amorphous entity or perpetually helpless, yet it may survive for a longer period. Janata dal and Janata party had a shorter life despite having lesser number of partners but the left front of west Bengal has been in exercise for past 26 years although it has comparatively more partners. Such alliances with a large number of partners can be called 'clustered alliances'. Political parties in India have changed their sometimes very frequently. The re-alignment takes place during the election period between the dissolution of legislature and the formation of the new government. Winnability in the election has been the main reason for the change of allies. There are other incentives as well. Political parties often give in to the immediate temptation and changes idea and extent their support to whoever is able and willing to pay the price for the time being. Also power, policy formation, economic gain and self preservation are some of the best known motivations behind the formation of alliance. The incentives can be diverse things even such in defining things as flattery and love. In India winnability of election has been one of the prominent allurements. Whatever the long aim of party may be, its chief goal is always to win the next election.¹¹

Alliance	Number of partners	Period
Janata dal	04	1988-91
Janata party	05	1977-79
United front	13	1996-98
NDA	24	1998-2004
UPA	19	2004-2014

Table 1: Number of partners and durability of an alliance

Year	Election for	Partners of the BJP	Partners of the congress(I)	Partners of the UF/Third Front
1996	Lok sabha and state assembly	BJP	Congress(I),AIADK	DMK,TMC,CPI
1998	Lok sabha	BJP,AIADMK,PMK,MDMK,TRC	Congress(I)	DMK,TMC,CPI
1999	Lok sabha	BJP,DMK,PMK,TRC,MDMK	Congress(I),AIADMK	CPI9M),CPI,TMC
2001	State assembly	BJP,DMK	Congress(I),TMC,CPI,CPM,AIADMK,PMK	MDMK
2004-14	State assembly	BJP,PDP	INC BJP	

Table 2: Reversal of alliance (1996-2001)

Further, alliances in India have dramatically increased the power and prestige of regional and smaller parties. It happened because most of the political parties could realize their goal of acquiring political power only with the help of regional formations. It is more true about the post 1989 alliances. The seat share of the regional parties in National Front, the United Front and the NDA was significantly high. More importantly, smaller parties even with a single member have succeeded in getting ministerial berths for them. Moreover, the political alliances have reduced the inter-party animosity to a great extent. The politicians no more indulge in the fierce arguments of the pasts because enemies of today can be allies of tomorrow. Thus the distance among different political groups has decreased sharply. Except the TDP, AGP, RSP and the Forward Bloc almost all regional, centrist and left parties have either allied with the congress or expressed a desire to do so. Thus most of the parties have given up their hostile positions towards other parties and adopted accommodative postures after the growth of alliance politics in India.

The alliance has demoralized the rank of the party. Grass root supporters create goodwill for their parties after an arduous and long efforts spread over many years but sometimes the top leaders enter into alliance with the very party which their workers had been opposing for a long time. Party functionaries, therefore lose credibility in the eyes of the local population and face difficulty in justifying the alliance. This is one reason why the alliances, particularly the electoral ones, have been opposed by the local or state level party functionaries. It has even resulted in party splits when the national leadership persisted in ignoring the objections of the local leaders. It is important to note that such electoral alliances have seldom succeeded in winning the elections. Self preservation is the top priority of any political party. Alliances are formed or broken with a view of enhancing the political gains. If an alliance threatens the existence of a political party, the party will not care for the agreed terms and instead work for the strengthening of its own base. In this regard an example can be considered from Haryana. In Lok Sabha elections of 1999, the electoral alliance of Indian National Lok Dal and Bhartiya Janata party led in 45 and 40 assembly segments (out of total 90) and won all the ten Lok Sabha seats.

This alarmed the Indian National Lok Dal greatly because the BJP which was a marginal player in Haryana till recently, was emerging as a formidable force and a potential challenge to it. In the assembly polls of 2000, therefore, the Indian National Lok Dal leader Om Prakash Chautala worked against the BJP candidates. While the BJP transferred its vote to Chautala the INLD supremo did not reciprocate and succeeded in reducing the BJP to a marginal presence in Haryana. BJP could win only 6 out of the 28 assembly seats it contested whereas the INLD won 47 out of 61. The pattern was also seen in Orissa where the Biju Janata Dal won 68 out of the 84 seats whereas BJP could win only 38 out of 63 assembly seats. This also shows that regional parties are ready to make concessions to their alliance partners as far as the elections for central parliament are concerned but they do not want to strengthen allies who could become rival in the future in their own states. And above all, the alliances have reduced the importance of political parties. It is no more possible for political party to win elections alone. Even a big and successful party like congress (I), had to face repeated defeat in the hands of invincible alliances. This condition is becoming increasingly pronounced in the states as well. In Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh Maharashtra Tamil Nadu, Jammu Kashmir and Kerala no single party has shown capability to win election without allies.¹²

Conclusion

The above analysis of coalition governments at the centre clearly reveals that the hung parliaments became the norm of the India because of fragmentation in political parties. It may be said that at present in India, the coalition partners require the spirit of accommodation, understanding and tolerance to make a success of coalition government. This is demonstrated during the last fifteen years of the working of two models (NDA &UPA) of coalitions headed by a strong ideological party as also the non-ideological party. A definite model of its functioning has developed to retain the stability of the political system. These two models have common features even though both models are unique in their own way. With the blend of these features and with adequate reflection, it is possible to build up a theory of Indian coalition system which could provide answer to the eternal question of operating a democratic structure in a multiple party system like that of India. Finally, in the words of eminent historian, Ramchandra Guha, it can be said, that Indian democracy is a work in progress and therefore we will have to wait and watch for new developments especially in the field of party system and electoral politics in India.

Today, our party system at the national level could be termed as a two party dominant system in a multi-party system, since the Congress and the BJP are the reigning parties leading the allies or partners in sharing power. These two parties need to work out means through which coalitions could remain effective and stable. Whatever solution that is recommended, it is a fact that the coalitions in India are symbolic of the pluralistic tendencies in India and Indian politics. The phenomenon of political parties of diverse ideologies and assertions coming together to share power has been a prominent feature of Indian politics which integrates party system and the nation. Therefore, coalition system needs to be strengthened to make democracy more effective and representative since coalitions are effective in enhancing democratic legitimacy, and national unity.

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