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Federalism and Coalition Party System in India

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Abstract: Independent India's federal project was as much a product of its colonial legacy as response to the exigency of nation building. The founding fathers expected their institutional framework to address simultaneously the complex diversity of the country and the building of a new nation. State formation was to be accompanied by nation formation. The state would play a decisive role in the construction of a political community, a particularly complex task given the myriad embedded loyalties of individuals to regions, religions, castes and languages. Accordingly, tendencies towards pluralism and decentralization have co-existed with centralizing features, leading some to qualify Indian Federalism as quasi-federalism. But discussions of federalism in India would be better served were they not confined to the Indian system as quasi-federalism is consistent with the western discourse on federalism that considers federalism in largely territorial terms. The coalitions are product of politics in a parliamentary democracy. The term as it is generally used in political science is a direct descendent of the exigencies of a multiparty system in a democratic set up. It is a phenomenon of a multi-party government where a number of minority parties join hands for the purpose of running the government, which is otherwise not possible in a democracy based on party system. A coalition is formed when many splinter groups in a house condescend to come together on a common platform sinking their broad differences and thereby form a majority in the House. It is an astonishing chorus of discards. Though outwardly a coalition appears to be one solid mass, inwardly it is ridden by party foibles and frantic party fervours bickering and it is for this reason that coalitions prove to be ephemeral.

The term coalition is derived from the Latin word 'Coaliti' which is the verbal substantive of coalescere, and alescere-to grow up, which means to go or to grow tomorrow. According to the dictionary meaning coalition means an act of coalescing, or uniting into one body: a union of persons, states: alliance. It is a combination of a body or parts into one body or whole. In the strict political sense the word coalition is used for an alliance or temporary union for joint action of various powers or states and also of the union into a single government of distinct parties or members of distinct parties. One of the acknowledge definition is that, "coalition means the joint use of resource to determine the outcome of the decisions where a resource is somewhat such that some critical quantity of it in the control of two or more parties to the decision is both necessary and sufficient to determine its outcome" It is also generally accepted that a coalition

"can take place only within the context of mixed motive in which both conflict and common interest are simultaneously present and must govern the course of action chosen". The paper present focused on one of the major changes in Indian politics over the last decade and a half has been the ever rising relevance of certain regional parties

and thus states- in India's political landscape. Many believe the development has strengthened Indian federalism. The fact that no national party-whether the BJP or Congress- is in a position to form a government on its own, is often cited as the primary reasons for such a situation. It has aptly been stated in this context, that "since 1996, regional parties have become indispensable in the formation of government at the national level. They have been important partners in the coalition that come to power after 1996. Besides, numerical strength of the regional parties has considerably increased, with a sizable vote share being captured by regional parties."

Federalism is intrinsically a democratic system, because it mitigates the centralization of power through power-sharing between the Centre and the States. Power-sharing between the Centre and the States is about which level of government is entitled to legislate on which matters. That job is done by the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution which spells out the subjects in the Union, the State and the Concurrent Lists. The breakdown of the national consensus on a parliamentary majority in India, a phenomena which is characteristic of the function of parliamentary governments in the developing countries has led to a new trend, that is coalition, to identify the federal division of powers with sub-national pluralism, coalitions have become an inevitable and indispensable part of the national and regional politics in the present politics of India and coalitions in India primarily owe their existence to a set of determined people, who combine to govern for personal and party ends. The unifying force is power. It is the pooling of ambitions. That at present scenario regional parties are sharing power at the centre and helping in the process of consensus is not true. In fact, they do not necessarily participate in governance of the country. They stay parochial in their outlook. Populism is their method to gather support. Thus the regional parties have come to stay in the Indian political system and their relevance is not only confined to their respective states but it also extends to the national scene. The federal approach in governance is the result of the assertion of the regional parties¹, their participation in the coalition government is the reinforcement of the "periphery" and the federal governance at the centre. The BJP led coalition government at the centre today is trying to be more federal in its organization and the use of Article 356 is to the minimum as compared to one party dominant system in India.

Political Party and Federalism in India

After independence, the Indian National Congress transformed itself into a political party and took over the administration and formed governments both at the Centre and the States. The Congress defended the strong centre in order to maintain national integrity of nation. This situation remained unchanged till Jawaharlal Nehru presided the destiny of the nation as its first premier. There were no dissidents and the centre-state relations were generally amicable, because of (a) the role of the Congress party which won freedom and institutionalized state-society relationship, (b) the national elite enjoyed high legitimacy because of contribution to the freedom struggle, (c) despite elitist predisposition, there was moderation in the use of state-power and, (d) the states as largely utilized as an instrument of social change. But power-sharing means something quite different when we think about it at the level of the Union government per se. Indian federalism has been inadvertently strengthened by regional parties becoming powerful enough in their own states to win enough parliamentary seats to stake a claim to ministerial positions in the Union Cabinet. The numerical clout of a regional party determines not only how many but also which particular ministries it can claim². Here, power-sharing is about the sharing of resources and even rent-seeking opportunities, rather than about evolving a shared consensus on the governance of those subjects that fall within the Union List³. In this context, the question of how

much federalism is desirable is far from clear-cut, for this second type of power-sharing can easily undermine the federal principle itself.

To what extent should the federal principle inform, or determine, what goes on in ministries, such as the railways, which belong to the Union List? If it is held hostage to the politics of one particular state (Bihar yesterday, Bengal today) then the railways are no longer really a Union subject but effectively a State subject. Railway projects that have remained on paper have histories of being propelled by one state satrap and obstructed by another, never to achieve fruition. The most recent fiasco is of course that of the Railway Budget, a document that may be presumed to carry the imprint of the Union Cabinet but is subject to retraction at the bidding of one state leader. Neither the revenue needs nor safety considerations for a public undertaking that serves the entire country prevents a Union ministry from being treated as an instrument of populism, pro-poor posturing, and a pocket borough to provide jobs to party cadres.

Centralized Federalism

During Nehru Era, India had a highly centralized federalism. The Congress party remained a centralized party, formulating all-India policies of the guidance and control of the Congress-led ministries in the states. After the death of Sardar Patel in December 1950, Nehru combined the premiership and the party President, and later handover to his protege. It was in this context in 1953 Nehru came to proclaimed that the „Congress is the country and country is the Congress Intra-party democracy in the political parties was not looked upon with favour and dissidence as suppressed with heavy hands. The Parliamentary wings of most of the national political parties followed the Congress line and voices from below were ignored and dissidence forcefully curbed.

The Centre, in order to maintain its supremacy, proclaimed Presidents Rule under Article 356 of the constitution. It was so common that, from June 1951 to November, 1967 Presidents Rule was proclaimed 14 times- in Kerala (6 times), Punjab (3 times) and in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Goa, Rajasthan and Haryana (one in each). After 1967, its use threatened state's rights and use of power sharing with regional leaders and parties. Between 1960s to 1980s Mrs. Gandhi humbled the Congress machine, re-established the supremacy of the Parliamentary party over the party organization, broke the power of the state Chief Ministers and established a new balance, or rather imbalance between the Centre and the State. The centre had allotted large funds to states but was centrally sponsored development projects, implemented by states while administered by the centre. However, Indira regimes policies of centralization, politicization and dictatorship had damaged the federal and democratic structure of the country which led to the rise of non-Congress political parties. The dominance of Congress party could not last long and the consensual politics of “Congress System” began to breakdown. The process became evident from 1969 onwards when Nehru's successor Indira Gandhi faced the strong opposition “rejected the principle of consensus in favour of the majoritarian principles. Federalism is intrinsically a democratic system, because it mitigates the centralization of power through power-sharing between the Centre and the States. Power-sharing between the Centre and the States is about which level of government is entitled to legislate on which matters.

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‘coalition’ meaning to go or grow together. Thus it means an act of coalescing or uniting into one body or alliance. It indicates the combination of a number of bodies or parts into one body or whole. In the political sense it is used to indicate an alliance or temporary union between various political groups for the exercise or control of political power. Professor Ogg defines coalition in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, as “cooperative arrangements under which distinct political parties or at all events members of such parties unite to form a Government or Ministry”. Thus, it can be said that result of the exigencies of competitive multi-party system in a parliamentary democracy is coalition. It is a phenomenon where more than two political parties come together to form a government, sinking their basic ideological differences in the event of the inability of any single party to command a workable

Majority in the lower house of the legislature

There are generally three types of coalitions are said to be formed on account of one of the following reasons.

1. No single political party is able to secure a working majority in the popular house on account of the presence of multi-party system. Under these circumstances a number like-minded political parties form the coalition to provide a workable majority and run the government.
2. In a Bi-party system a deadlock may be created due of even balance between two parties allying itself with a minor group such as neutral or defectors till the majority in its favour.
3. A coalition may be necessitated by a national crisis when the various political groups may suspend their political strife and collaborate in the general cause of protecting and promoting.

Federalism and Coalition Government in India:

The history of the Indian federalism can be traced back to the provisions enshrined in the Government of India Act, 1935. The Indian constitution fulfils the requirement of a federal system by prescribing the presence of two levels of governance simultaneously operating at (i) national, central and federal government; (ii) state, regional and provincial government along with the division of powers between centre and state allocated by the constitution. Though there is distribution of powers between centre and state in the Indian Federation and the respective areas of competence of each is earmarked, the constitution of India provides for a larger concentration of powers on the central government. In *State of Rajasthan v. Union of India*, it was quoted that according to Granville Austin, the Constitution of India was perhaps the first constituent body to embrace from the start what A.H. Birch and others have called “cooperative federalism”. Chief Justice Beg called the Constitution ‘amphibian’.”If then our Constitution creates a Central Government which is ‘amphibian’, in the sense that it can move either on the federal or on the unitary plane, according to the needs of the situation and circumstances of a case”. Federalism which shapes the centre-State relations and begets its peculiar problems is a political contrivance to strike an equilibrium between regional aspirations and country-wide needs, and its necessarily follows from this that the equilibrium is dynamic and not static while a country’s ongoing political processes are designed to monitor and reflect such urges, at least partly it also become necessary to align the governing constitutions with the ground level realities⁴. A federal system, in other words, is not an immutable one but needs to undergo reexamination at intervals, the aim being to re-adjust or at any rate, reconfirm the equilibrium in the light of emerging situational compulsions,. Where this reexamination is delayed or avoided, clashes inevitable arise and inter-governmental harmony comes under strain. It is ironic that the resultant acrimony thrives at the expense of the tax-

payers money what is more, the time and the energy which could otherwise. Thus one can say that Indian Federation is based on Co-operative federalism.

Emergence of Coalition Government in India The process of fragmentation of the national party system and emergence of minority or coalition governments started in India from 1967. This period also marked the emergence of coalitions and also new parties and mergers along with breakup of some parties and absorption of the others. This began the era of Coalition Politics or Multi party rule in India. The adoption of multi party system and regionalism changed the centre-state relations to a certain extent. Participation of many regional parties in the coalition government at the centre particularly indicates the significant shift from centralized governance towards shared rule and federal governance⁵.

Role of Governor In the recent times the appointment of the governor has gone through a rough phase due to coalition form of government. Political compulsions to form the government especially at the national level solely guided by the majority gaining political party certainly results in deteriorating Centre- State relations. Further also it would make the office of Governor exposed to vulnerabilities of the political pressures. For example, recent wholesale removal, transfer and resignations of the Governors of Rajasthan, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Punjab, who were previously appointed by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government and more particularly the way in which the government of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) dealt with the Governor of Tamil Nadu by getting into a avoidable controversy of a political natures proves beyond any doubt that the politics in India has gone a long way to come within the grips of co-operative federalism.

State Autonomy

The participation of regional parties in the Centre has significantly impacted Indian federal structure. The formation of coalition government has resulted to a large extent deviation from the characteristic of Indian federalism with centralizing tendencies. With regional parties emergence the demand for state autonomy has increased drastically. The participation of regional parties has resulted in unstable, weak government at the centre. Every party to the coalition attempts to assert its own geographical, cultural and economic interests in the political process. The regional parties' emphasis on the development of their region instead of focusing on the development of the national as a whole⁶.

Conclusion: Coalition can take two forms: Pre election alliance and adjustment and post election agreements to share political power. The success of a coalition government would vary to a great extent on the factors which lead to its formation. It is true that the Indian did not have a very good experience with coalition Government experiments. But the Coalition Government in India is here to stay. In the light of above mentioned impact of coalition government⁷ on Centre State relations I would to suggest few reforms for the proper regulation of the Coalition form of Government.

1. The coalition government must be made Legitimate. An electoral adjustment will provide a common platform to the parties wishing to form a coalition to appeal to the electorate on the basis of an agreed programme of action. A Broad base programme as suggested by Second Reforms Commission must be adopted so that Socio- economic development of the country is met.

2. Such a coalition has another advantage too. The radicalism of the parties joining such a coalition would, to a great extent, be smoothened in the process of mutual concessions without impairing or damaging the image of either of them.

Thus, in the end it can be said that though the coalition form of Government provides an opportunity to different to Socio-Cultural and Economic parties to participate in the

Governance of the Nation, it brings about a lot of turf between the Centre and State. The regional parties at the centre attempt to articulate and aggregate regional interests' irrespective interest of Nation which in turn affects the overall development of the Nation. Also the most important office which is necessary for the proper maintenance of centre state relations that is the Office of the Governor is also politicized in order to maintain the stability of the coalition government.

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