

## **ALLIANCE POLITICS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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The ever changing nature of politics in the multiparty political systems of the world has acquired new modes of representation to assimilate ever rising aspirations and demands of the new emerging groups in the society. Therefore a new mode of representation in the form of alliance politics has been institutionalized. The Indian polity has passed through various crucial phases till the formation of the grand NDA government in 1999. This study will analyses various phases of the alliance politics in India.

### **Alliance Politics: An Initial Phase of Pre-independence Era**

While looking back at the political history of the party system in India we find that the emergence of the present alliance politics is not a new phenomenon rather it has its roots even before the independence and it continued in the post-independence era. During pre-independence times the Congress experimented with alliance politics in 1937 when elections to the provincial assemblies were held under the Government of India Act, 1935. The Congress at that time had a tacit electoral understanding with the Muslim League because it was not confident of a decisive victory in the United Provinces Legislature but in the post-elections, the Congress refused.<sup>1</sup> After that a coalition Ministry led by the Muslim League was formed on April 24, 1943 which included members of the Hindu Scheduled Caste communities and two members from the Congress.<sup>2</sup> The interim government of India in 1946 was another alliance government of the Congress and the Muslim League. The alliance government experience was soon turned into a harsh exercise due to absence of the parliamentary norms and basically due to intentional and determined impasse by the Muslim League on the issue of controlling the Finance Ministry.<sup>3</sup> Although initial attempts of forming the alliance governments were unsuccessful yet they marked important historical milestones in the Indian polity.

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In the post-independence times the Congress became a catch-all umbrella party that claimed to assimilate the diverse interests of the leaders and political groups throughout the country. The Indian polity at that time got the distinction of one-party dominance system although several minor political parties existed and competed for the influence, ascendance and control but immense power and prestige of the Congress kept those competing political parties underneath from effectively participating in the game of politics.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently the failure of the Congress to recognize those diversities led to the assertion of interests and identities by the snubbed factions that led to fragmentation in the Congress and the party system that gave rise to many new regional and national political parties. Because of this reason the Congress party is referred as mother of many political parties.

### **Evolutionary Phase: Emergence of Alliance Politics**

In early 1966, Ram Manohar Lohia in his thesis 'The Consolidation of Opposition Parties' suggested a three-fold planned strategy to consolidate the opposition political parties at one stage to defeat the Congress<sup>5</sup> The basic emphasis of the Lohia strategy was to unite all the opposition political parties at one common platform to challenge the Congress dominance because no single political party was in the position to do that alone rather the combined votes of all the opposition political parties were more than that of the Congress.

Soon the impact of the Lohia movement was visible during the 4<sup>th</sup> general elections held in 1967 which brought watershed changes in the Indian politics. Several opposition political parties in the states inspired by the socialist ideology of Lohia formed alliances which were exclusively based on the anti-Congress sentiments. The upsurge brought a great many new entrants from the middle castes or OBCs into the game of electoral politics and turned it a truly competitive.<sup>6</sup> It was the first serious check administered to the Congress' dominance<sup>7</sup> due to the rise of many regional political parties.

After elections the number of seats for the Congress dropped from three hundred sixty one in 1962 to two hundred eighty three seats i.e. a drop of seventy eight seats. The Congress seats dropped from 69.4 percent of the total Lok Sabha seats in 1962 to 54.4 in 1967. The national political parties won 76.1 percent of the vote share while the newly emerged regional

political parties won forty five seats and 9.7 percent of the vote share in 1967.<sup>8</sup> For the very first time since independence the Congress lost its hegemonic control over the Indian polity and there was end of its 'one party dominance' status.<sup>9</sup> It was the direct manifestation of the failure of the grand old party to assimilate growing socio-economic and political diversities prevalent in the party and in the ever unfolding and vibrant Indian society. Therefore, the post 1967 elections era witnessed a significant change in the polity with transfer of power earlier concentrated around the Congress to various political parties and the party alliances at the regional level.

### **The Janata Party Experiment (1977)**

After the 6<sup>th</sup> general elections in 1977, the Janata Party formed the first non-Congress government at the national level. For some it initiated emergence of a loose bi-party system in the country that swept polls and inflicted a huge set-back to the Congress dominance.<sup>10</sup> The Janata Party was formed during the emergency in January 1977 in a very short duration of time by a hasty merger of five political parties. The constituent political parties were Bharatiya Jan Sangh, Bharatiya Lok Dal, Congress (O), Congress for Democracy and the Socialists with one point agenda to restrict, weaken and defeat of the Congress.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that though the Janata Party came into existence with the merger of five political parties those officially surrendered their identities but practically the merging political parties and their leaders kept those identities alive. It is because of that the Janata Party government is referred to as the first 'alliance' or 'coalition' government experiment at the national level.

The Janata won 72.8 percent of the total seats contested and 41.3 percent of the vote share which was 6.8 percent more than that of the Congress. The regional political parties could win forty nine seats and 8.8 percent of the vote share.<sup>12</sup> The Janata Party completely ignored the important principle of the alliance formation that the distinct ideological differences and interests of the constituent political parties should be assimilated at one level before becoming a political unit of a single identity to maintain stability of the government. As anticipated, the Janata Party government met its early demise in 1979 and the major reason was the internal bickerings and ideological incompatibilities based on group loyalties of the yesteryears.<sup>13</sup>

Although a failure yet the pioneer attempt of forming a non-Congress government by the opposition political parties at the national level against the dominant Congress was an inspiration that set the stage for the first alliance government after the 9<sup>th</sup> general elections in 1989.

### **National Front Alliance Government (1989)**

The landmark 9<sup>th</sup> general elections of 1989 provided unique results and for the first time a hung Parliament was thrown in which no single political party or a group of political parties could get an absolute majority.<sup>14</sup> The efforts of the other political parties to forge a viable alliance against the Congress resumed before elections with the formation of the Janata Dal by an expelled Congressman V.P.Singh who formed a loose anti-Congress, anti-Rajiv assemblage, the Jan Morcha with Arun Nehru and Arif Mohammad Khan on October 11, 1988.<sup>15</sup> V.P.Singh tried to adopt the ideology of Ram Manohar Lohia to unite anti-Congress political parties. Similar to the Janata Party of 1977 the only focus of the new political formation was the complete opposition to the Congress and its' ouster from the national scene. During the whole campaign, the opposition against the Congress was developed among the electorate to such a huge level that Paul Brass remarked that the National Front emerged as a 'New Janata Coalition' that sought to duplicate unity and victory of the Janata Party of 1977.<sup>16</sup> The earnest efforts were made to secure electoral benefits by developed anti-Congress hype among the electorate.

The election results threw a fractured verdict. The most important feature of the results was a clear rejection of the Congress as it lost its dominant electoral status. Although the Congress lost majority yet it was the single largest political party that succeeded in securing one hundred ninety seven seats in the Lok Sabha and 39.5 percent of the vote share that was still short by seventy five seats of the required electoral majority in the Lok Sabha. The BJP made huge gains in terms of seats and vote share percentage. The BJP won eighty five seats and 11.4 percent of the vote share and the JD won 17.8 percent of the vote share. The national political parties in total won 79.3 percent of the vote share where as the regional political parties won 9.3 percent and other political parties won 11.3 percent.<sup>17</sup>

The major gainer was the BJP that improved its electoral tally from just two Lok Sabha seats in 1984 to eighty five seats in the 9<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha and emerged a real force to reckon in the

national politics. The regional political parties rose to prominence in an emphatic manner. V.P Singh led National Front manufactured a parliamentary majority on the basis of outside support of the BJP and the Left Front parties.<sup>18</sup>The BJP and the Left Front were two ideologically extreme political parties. The National Front government was a unique post-election alliance of different national and regional political parties. The National Front completely ignored lesson of the Janata Party experience to ensure internal ideological cohesiveness as the ideological leanings of the Janata Dal and its two outside supporters were unconnected and beyond the ideological range. In 1989 a tri-nodal party system took shape<sup>19</sup>and the phase symbolized beginning of multiple-bipolarity<sup>20</sup>in the Indian polity.

The political space vacated by the Congress was slowly and steadily occupied by other new and old political formations. Soon the internal and external contradictions among the allies of the National Front government came to the forefront. The dominant and mighty ways of V.P.Singh and particularly his decision to implement recommendations of the Mandal Commission report without consulting and taking into confidence the leaders of the Janata Party and the Lok Dal created serious fissures in the alliance. The outside supporter the BJP was annoyed after the forced stoppage of L.K. Advani's *rath yatra* (chariot pilgrimage) and subsequently Advani's arrest in Bihar became the immediate reason for withdrawal of the outside support to eleven month old government on November 7, 1990 and the government lost the no-confidence motion.

Subsequently JD(S) a breakaway group with fifty four MPs led by Chandra Shekhar formed the government with outside support of the Congress. After few months the Congress got disenchanted from the government due to independent working of the Prime Minister and its two times walk-outs from the Lok Sabha on the various contentious issues forced the Prime Minister to resign on March 6, 1991.

### **Alliance Government (1996)**

The Indian polity formally entered into the phase of alliance government in 1996. Similar to the previous general elections the only focus of all the contesting political formations was the defeat of the Congress and for that purpose the indispensability of the alliances was recognized.

The two main political formations which contested against the Congress were the BJP and the National Front supported by the Left Front. The BJP introduced A.B.Vajpayee as a moderate face of the party. The elections resulted in further breakdown of the one party dominant system and there was a gradual transition towards a new region based multiparty system in which all the major national political parties such as the BJP, the Congress and the Janata Dal competed for the power.<sup>21</sup>

The BJP successfully emerged as the single largest party for the first time. It won more seats than the one hundred twenty seats in 1991 and the Congress finished second by securing only one hundred forty seats as compare to its earlier two hundred thirty two seats in 1991 with a sharp decline of ninety two seats. The regional political parties marked impressive increase of seats from fifty seats in 1991 to one hundred twenty nine seats in 1996 and increased vote share from 13 percent in 1991 to 22.4 in the 1996 i.e. an increase of 9.5 percent.<sup>22</sup>

The highly impressive number of seats for the regional political parties and simultaneous decreased number of seats for the national political parties encouraged the regional political parties to play a proactive role in the sphere of the national politics. The BJP was quick to learn that its party discipline did not leave much scope for the accommodation in a typical parliamentary set-up<sup>23</sup> and if it wished to consolidate its electoral base in different parts of the India to achieve power, it needed to bring radical changes in its long preached electoral policy and by sharing its political space with the regional political parties i.e. dilution of core ideology to become the widely acceptable.

The BJP being the single largest party was invited by the President Shankar Dyal Sharma to form the government with direction to prove majority by May 31, 1996. Although the government was short of a simple majority by seventy seven members yet the first BJP Prime Minister was sworn in on May 16, 1996<sup>24</sup> and A.B.Vajpayee constituted a 12-member cabinet.<sup>25</sup> Till that time the communal image of the BJP projected it an orthodox pariah party to the other national and regional political parties as they were not readily willing to forge alliance with it. Therefore, the Prime Minister Vajpayee had to wait in vain for thirteen days in hope of

getting support of other political parties and then resigned on May 27, 1996 without facing Lok Sabha to prove majority.<sup>26</sup>

The Congress expressed its inability to form the government after the fall of Vajpayee government and the President invited Janata Dal leader H.D Deve Gowda after he submitted letter of support signed by thirteen regional political parties to stake claim for the government formation. Deve Gowda as a leader of the United Front was administered oath of office on June 1, 1996. The United Front was supported by the Congress and the CPI (M).<sup>27</sup>The characteristic feature of the government was its formation on the basis of post-election alliances with the regional political parties which propagated and contested elections against each other. The United Front was largely dependent on the out side support of the Congress which was the main opponent of the most of the United Front allies during elections. The United Front-Congress alliance substantiated that the political parties abandoned all the principles of alliance formation for the sake of gaining power. The United Front government worked under the consensual leadership of H.D.Deve Gowda till the untimely withdrawal of out side support by the Congress on March 30, 1997. The reason stated in three-page withdrawal letter to the President was that the United Front did not remain a secular entity.<sup>28</sup>

The Congress faced the immense pressure to avoid mid term polls. Therefore, the Congress insisted for change of the United Front leadership for its support. The External Affairs Minister Inder Kumar Gujral was chosen for the post of the Prime Minister. Later on the Congress President Sitaram Kesri met the President and assured outside support of the Congress.<sup>29</sup> The Gujral government met the same fate as it could not last long due to repeated withdrawal of the Congress support to the United Front government on November 28, 1997 after publication of the Jain Commission Report in which the then DMK government in Tamil Nadu was indicted for security lapses which had resulted in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in May 1991.

The various alliance governments repeatedly committed mistakes of the Janata Party rather than learning and incorporating lessons learnt from that failure. There were repeated failures to build a broad based consensual and durable alliance as the only objective of all the

constituents was to ensure the defeat of the opponent at any cost than to work for a stable government and efficient governance.

### **Maturing of Alliance Phase: BJP-led Alliance Government (1998)**

The Congress at the time of 1998 general elections was highly against the electoral strategy of alliances but the BJP successfully adopted the same. In 1990s the BJP gradually made amendments to its ideology and shifted from the dominant ethno-religious mobilization of Ramjanmabhoomi movement towards a softer policy<sup>30</sup> to expand its electoral base in other parts of the country. In 1996 the BJP completely failed to garner support from other political parties for the continuation of the government. Therefore, to get rid of its pariah status and the North exclusive image the BJP adopted the pragmatic electoral strategy of alliance formation with various political parties through out the India and especially in the regions where it had historically weak presence.

For that purpose the BJP diluted its aggressive stand on the three contentious issues of Ram Mandir, Abolition of Article 370 that gives special status to Jammu and Kashmir and introduction of uniform civil code. The BJP changed its face, ideology and thrust inspite of the pressure by the RSS.<sup>31</sup> It needs to clarify that although the BJP propagated that it had changed its approach towards the long preached three core issues but principally they remained an integral part of the 1998 manifesto of the BJP. Even then the BJP successfully forged alliances with other political parties

The BJP especially focused on regions of its historical geographical deficit i.e. the Southern and Eastern regions and formalized strategic pre-electoral alliances with important political parties like Samata Party in Bihar, SAD in Punjab, HVP in Haryana, TC in West Bengal, JD in Karnataka, TDP and NTR TDP (LP) in Andhra Pradesh, AIADMK, MDMK and PMK in Tamilnadu, AGP in Assam, BJD in Orissa, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, Lok Shakti in Karnataka, Mizo National Front in Mizoram.

The most positive feature of the BJP's new electoral strategy was its success in securing support of secular leaders like Jayalalitha, Rama Krishna Hegde, Mamata Banerjee, V.P.Singh,



Chandrababu Naidu and Karunanidhi who had been highly critical of the core Hindutva ideology of the BJP. In the beginning hastily forged alliances of the BJP lacked genuine belief, unity and ideological compatibility among allies. Infact clear emphasis of the BJP' alliances had been on spatial compatibility at the expense of ideological compatibility.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike the BJP, the Congress was still reluctant towards the idea of forging alliances to control its already eroded support base rather idealistically hoped for forming single party majority government of its own. The Congress electoral policy was categorically stated by the then Congress President Sita Ram Kesari in Calcutta Congress plenary meet in 1997. The President announced that the Congress would fight the BJP, the Left as well as the regional political parties together as the growth of the regionalism posed a serious threat to country's unity.<sup>33</sup> The Congress did not accept new reality that in times of alliance governments the regional political parties would play active role by supporting and working in the national governments.

The Congress feared setbacks in upcoming elections and its already shrunken political space in previous general elections put a serious question mark on its survival. In such a dire situation the Congress leaders convinced Sonia Gandhi to take charge as the leader of the party. After joining the Congress, Sonia Gandhi as the Congress President denounced communal atrocities perpetrated by the BJP's followers and promoted the Congress as a secular alternative to the BJP alliance.<sup>34</sup>

The election results presented a new BJP that was more moderate and accommodating. It won the best ever one hundred eighty two seats. It was an increase of twenty one seats to its earlier tally of one hundred sixty one seats in 1996 with 25.6 percent of the vote share as compare to 20.3 percent of the 1996 i.e. an increase of 5.3 percent. The vote share percent of the national political parties fell from 69.1 percent to 67.9 percent and the other political parties won 32 percent of the total vote share. The vote share of the regional political parties was 18.8 percent with one hundred one seats.<sup>35</sup> The results confirmed the ever growing role of the regional and sub-regional political parties in the formation of alliance and further strengthened the extensive 'regionalization of the national political parties.'<sup>36</sup> The Congress fell from 28.8 in 1996 to 25.8-a fall of 3 percent.<sup>37</sup>

The President K.R.Narayanan invited Vajpayee, the leader of BJP parliamentary board to form the government and directed to win the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha.<sup>38</sup> Unlike 1996, the cautious BJP needed to manage contradictions among the allies and to transform the political coalition to a cultural coalition. Therefore the BJP devised a unique post-election mechanism of National Agenda of Governance (NAG) on the lines of the CMP of the United Front to manage contradictions among the allies and ushered an era of national reconciliation and consensus.<sup>39</sup> The objective of the BJP was to assimilate the distinct interests of different political parties by means of confidence building mechanism. It witnessed a fundamental transformation in the approach of the BJP. It is pertinent to mention here that although the BJP issued the NAG to converge interests of the different political parties but no common name was specified to address the union of the BJP and its allies. The 1998 alliance government experiment of the BJP could last only for thirteen months because one of the key allies, AIADMK withdrew support on April 17, 1999 and the BJP led government failed to win confidence motion by only one vote in Lok Sabha and new elections were announced by the President after dissolving the 12<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha.<sup>40</sup>

The BJP-led alliance government again failed because of two basic failures of the BJP. Firstly the hasty manners in which alliances were forged with various political parties and secondly no attention was paid to dilute range of ideological divisions among the allies. It is worth to be noted that by the year 1998 the BJP established itself as a political force and expanded its influence in different regions of the country. The Indian polity moved towards the post-Congress era in the sense that the Congress ceased to be a pole around which political competition was structured in the past.<sup>41</sup>

### **Grand National Democratic Alliance Government (1999)**

The 1998 alliance government suffered early demise but the BJP drew many positives out of that. The BJP focused more vigorously on the electoral strategy of alliances to project itself as a catch all political party. The BJP leadership maintained that before the 12<sup>th</sup> general elections the secularists and some other political parties worked as the king makers but in 1999 they all rushed towards the BJP for forging alliances and the real success of the BJP was in making those secularists its allies, promoters and supporters.<sup>42</sup> The acceptance of the BJP as a moderate by the

secular-leftist political parties such as the Samata Party and the JD (U) made the BJP to put its so called contentious issues on the backburner<sup>43</sup> to shed the image of only a Hindu party. The alliances of the 1998 were arranged together in haste without clearing all the consequent uncertainties and weaknesses but the approach towards the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections was more systematic and meticulous than in the 1998.

To fulfill its objective, the BJP became very pragmatic and flexible to follow the new approach of consolidating, strengthening and expanding the previous alliances and adding new allies through out the India with promise of providing the political stability. The BJP didn't hesitate to reach out to more regional political parties which were once considered to be its foes. The compulsions of alliance building took precedence over strengthening of the BJP's internal organisation and similarly the national level politics over the BJP's interests at state level.<sup>44</sup>

The number of pre-poll allies of the BJP kept on increasing and that was the right time to formally assign a name to the grouping. Therefore on May 15, 1999 the prominent leaders of the BJP and its thirteen allies announced the formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with Vajpayee as its chairman. The allies also decided to adopt a common manifesto, a refashioned version of the NAG.<sup>45</sup> The BJP realized that the way to form an alliance government could not be possible by its own specific support base concentrated in particular regions of the country rather there was need to assimilate the distinct interests of other political parties and their respective support bases. The NDA contested elections under the leadership of A.B.Vajpayee who was projected as an able leader for a stable government.<sup>46</sup> It is pertinent to mention that similar to the 1998 general elections the allies of the NDA contested elections on their own regional specific manifestos and symbols.

The election results marked a significant break in succession of the hung Parliaments. After more than a decade a pre-poll alliance formed the government at the national level with an absolute majority.<sup>47</sup> The NDA won a decisive and comfortable win and its number of seats touched the surplus majority of three hundred one seats after the joining of Maneka Gandhi, an Independent post-poll ally and an outside supporter TDP i.e. twenty nine more seats than the required magic number of 272 seats. The good number of seats for the regional political parties

was due to assertion of region specific development issues. The results confirmed that the BJP and its leadership had perfected the art of consensus and compromise to assimilate divergent views of the allies to bind them together. The BJP itself enjoyed exceptionally high success rate by winning one hundred eighty two seats out of one hundred thirty nine seats contested along with 23.7 percent of the vote share i.e. a ratio nearly twice the average for the national political parties but its vote share fell by 1.8 percent than that of the 1998.<sup>48</sup> The real difference was made due electoral adjustment with the allies.

The strategy of electoral alliances provided its worth as a key element behind the success of the BJP in transforming votes into the parliamentary seats in the 1998 and the 1999 general elections.<sup>49</sup> The meticulous and strategic choice of the allies with proper seat sharing arrangements by the BJP unlike the 1998 helped it to enter into those areas where it was not strong in the past. A.B.Vajpayee formed the government on October 11, 1999 and became the first Prime Minister since 1971 to get re-elected for two consecutive terms and the BJP as a whole moved out of its pan North specific image and entered into new regions of the country through a broad based electoral policy that secured convincing majority for the BJP-led NDA. Thus the consistent rise of the BJP since 1989 fructified finally with the formation of the NDA government.

All those years a lonesome Congress with its 'ekla chalo' (move alone) policy not only pushed itself to the margins but also declined rapidly.<sup>50</sup> The support base of the Congress deteriorated to the serious levels and it could manage only dismal one hundred fourteen seats, the lowest ever for it since independence. It was a systematic decline of the Congress that touched nadir because of its reluctance to follow the electoral strategy of alliances. It forged only informal electoral adjustments with a few political parties and with allies it managed to win only one hundred thirty eight seats altogether.

The NDA provided its first alliance based full national government while holding together a large number of political parties in its fold for a long time. The NDA almost completed its five year term when the Prime Minister Vajpayee recommended early dissolution of the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha on February 2004 because the over ambitious BJP hoped to transform the

perceived popularity of the NDA government into the Lok Sabha seats and the mandate to rule again after the elections. The important factors which contributed to the success of the NDA were its pre-poll alliances, a common agenda of governance, leadership of Vajpayee that ensured stability, accommodation of the regional interests, dilution of the Hindutva ideology, joining of the anti-Congress forces, fruitful past experience and finally the absence of a viable alternative.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore on the basis of above discussion we come to the conclusion that the Indian polity began experiments with the alliance politics in the pre independence period which continued after the independence. Till the Congress supremacy, the alliance politics could not become a regular phenomenon but with the decline of the Congress at the national scene in 1977, a strong base was set up for the anti-Congress governments. The first genuine alliance government was set up in 1989 and subsequently the brief experiences of the alliance governments in 1996 and 1998 led to the formation of twenty four political parties based, the grand BJP-led NDA government which marked the ushering of alliance based stable government in India while managing the wide contradictions among the allies.

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