

THE ERA OF COALITION

Synopsis: Regionalism is on the rise and coalition has come to stay. Gone are the days of one-party rule and strong central leadership. The electorate has given a fragmented verdict in the `1996 General Elections resulting in United Front coalition Government in New Delhi with the outside support of Congress. With the defeat of Deve Gowda, new coalition equation followed and I.K. Gujral emerged as the consensus candidate and became P.M. Designate on 20th April, 1997. The feudal political lords and regional bosses played their expected decisive role in the selection and elimination of candidates for P.M.'s post. There have been too many coalition experiments and most of them a failure. In U.P. a new coalition experiment is being tried

Regionalism is on the rise and coalition the order of the day in present political scenario in India. 'Coalesce or perish' has become the mantra and watched. There are a number of powerful region like AGP, Akali Dal, VHP, DMK, TDP, AIADMK, Samta Party, BSP, Samjawadi Party, Shiva sena etc. whose chiefs are really calling the shots and national parties find themselves on the margin. The chief ministers of regional parties installed in various States like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana, Punjab, Assam, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh etc. have now become more powerful than ever before and are in a coveted position to dictate terms to the Prime Minister at the centre. Their say in decision-making in national affairs has become decisive. This phenomenon coupled with hung Parliament has resulted in an era of coalition and party-alignments of all sorts.

Gone is the single party rule when the Congress stood like a colossal and enjoyed absolute majority in the Parliament and State legislatures. It has created a vacuum because no other party so far has been able to replace Congress as a single majority party in the Parliament. The 1966 General Elections, called the greatest show on the earth, resulted in a hung Parliament. Electorate did not give any single party a clear majority mandate. Their choice was no single political party. Voters have matured and can no more be taken for a ride. They have begun to distinguish between regional and national issues differently. People gave a clear mandate against Congress but did not favour any other single party as a majority party. This fragmented verdict made the role of the regional parties all the more important BJP emerged as the single largest party with 160 seats and its allies Shiv Sena, Samata Party and Haryana Vikas party secured 15.8 and 2 seats respectively. Congress won only 136 seats. National Front and Left

Front combination won 112 seats while 101 seats went to Regional Parties including 19 to independents and others. Since BJP and its allies had emerged as a single largest group, the President invited Atal Bihari Vajpayee to form the government which lasted just for 13 days as he failed to prove his majority and another coalition government followed under H.D. Deve Gowda, leader of the United Front. The Congress supported the U.F. government from the outside.

The United Front government, a coalition of 13 parties, could last just for 10 months as the congress pulled the rug from down the feet of H.D. Deve Gowda. Again an exercise has begun to form a new coalition government under the new consensus U.F. leader and designated Prime Minister I.K. Gujral. This time Tamil Maanila congress is not taking part in the government and has decided to support I.K. Gujral from the outside. Again, this could be possible because of the pledge of support to the United Front from outside. Thus, within a span of just 10 months, Delhi has seen three coalition governments in succession.

Obviously, 2 party systems have not succeeded in India and there has been ever increasing proliferation and fragmentation in the parties. There are defections, desertions, divisions, alignments, counter-alignments and alliances galore not because of any ideological differences but only because of personal gains and petty parochial interests. There is no charismatic, towering central leader who can keep the flock together and united in a party. Gone are the days of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi when congress held the fort like a monolith. Now, heterogeneous permutation and combination hold the sway. The chief ministers of States and leaders of the regional parties have become the king-makers. And they want their pound of the flesh. Now the route to the gaddi at Delhi lies via Chennai, Mumbai, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Lucknow as is clear from the recent 2 weeks political drama enacted in Delhi after the defeat of Deve Gowda in the Parliament on 11th April, 1997.

Following the defeat of confidence motion, the race hotted up of the coveted P.M.'s post and canvassing reached a feverish pitch at various levels within the United Front, the 13-party conglomeration. Many names were floated as the consensus candidates but I.K. Gujral and G.K. Moopanar were the only strong contenders. Moopanar failed to make to the top slot only because of the regional lords and party bosses, particularly from the south, West Bengal and Bihar and their strong likes and dislikes and purely regional interests. This reflects the growing feudalism in current Indian politics.

How far and how often coalition lasts is another matter, but it has come to stay. In many States the position is no different. In Gujarat Shankar Singh Vaghela was in power because of outside support of the Congress. In Haryana HVP and BJP are in coalition; in Punjab Akali Dal is in power with the help of BJP. In Uttar Pradesh Maya wati is on the throne in coalition with BJP. In Kerala and West Bengal also there are coalition governments. In Bombay Shivsena-BJP combine rules the roast, BJP itself is thinking of forming its own Rashtriya coalition Morcha and is in search of possible allies besides those it already has. Because even if elections are held in near future BJP may not win enough seats to form government on its own in the Centre Political Pandits and analysts feel that national party like BJP has reached a plateau. Certainly two party system seems to have become obsolete and the voters have lost faith in one single leader and the party led by him. If one coalition fails, there would be another and still another if need be. The Indian political waters are now in floods of feudalism and there is no relief from the successive waves of alliances and coalitions. The trend has become well established and central leadership has become a hostage to regional kshatrapas and lords.

Time was when one party rule and strong central leadership was a rule and coalition an exception or aberration. Now the equation seems to have changed completely in favour of regional alternatives and alliances. Many political beliefs and convictions like one party rule, strong one leader party governance, stability linked with one party, monolithic hegemony and dynastic rule etc. have been proved a myth. Now cooperative federalism is very much a vogue. It was first experimented at the state level in 1967 in the form of Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVB) following the fourth General Elections. At the centre the first coalition experiment was done in 1977 under the leadership of Morarji Desai. Then again it was tried in 1989 when V.P. Singh was sworn in as the seventh Prime Minister and Devi Lal as his deputy on 2 December. On February 19, 1990 Devi Lal was dismissed and there was split in Janta Dal, dissident made Chandra Shekhar as their leader. V.P. Singh had to resign and Chandra Shekhar was sworn in as the P.M. and Devi Lal as Dy. P.M. on Nov. 11, 1990. Finally Chandra Shekhar had to resign and General Elections were declared.

It does not follow that coalition governments are bad or they cannot succeed. In Kerala and West Bengal coalition governments have been great success. Coalition collapses when there is not ideological unity and conceptual harmony in the coalescing parties. Only to coalesce and ally with one another just to keep a particular party out of power, or to satisfy the lust for position of power are sheer opportunistic and would not hold long. No doubt today politics is

the art of possibility and options but it never follows that political parties can take the voters for a ride. The Indian electorate is now mature enough to understand the intricacies and power-politics and party intrigues. The voters react accordingly and vote not blindly or swept by emotive slogans.

In Uttar Pradesh, a totally new coalition experiment is being tried. BSP-BJP have formed a coalition government at Lucknow on the principle of "Chief Minister by rotation". After prolonged Paleys and deliberations both the allies agreed to share power on the formula of "Chief Minister by rotation", with Mayawati heading the first government. Kalyan Singh of BJP would be the Chief Minister for the next 6 months. It was also agreed to have 50-50 representation in the Cabinet, a Home Minister from BJP and a Steering committee headed by BSP Supremo Kashiram and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani and the Assembly Speaker from the B.J.P. Under this agreement Mayawati took charge of the State for the second time in 2 years. The last BJP-BSP spell lasted just for 4 months in 1995, 136 days to be exact. This is totally a new experiment in India, a king of political relay race where the runners are at liberty to determine their speed. How long this second honeymoon and dispensation last is just a matter of guess.