

GENESIS OF COALITION POLITICS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Since Independence in 1947, India had experienced one dominant party rule of Congress party. Congress was at the forefront of the Indian freedom movement and enjoyed great respect among the masses due to its policies, leadership, and overall contributions made by a galaxy of charismatic leaders. Unlike one dominant party rule in the whole of the country after India's independence, Kerala opted for a coalition government since the beginning. The researcher tries to trace the meaning and origin of coalition politics. She further attempts to bring forth and analyze the political, and socio-economic scenarios of Kerala that prevented one-party rule in the state since its existence as a group of princely states or as a constituent state of the Indian Federation.

KEYWORDS: Kerala, Coalition, Travancore, Nairs, Ezhavs, Congress, Marxist, Centre, State

There have been many ups and downs in the history of state politics of Indian polity. India is a Union of States which functions under the parliamentary form of government with a multiparty system. The structural basis of the Indian federal structure of India appears to be quasi-federal because the emphasis has been laid on a strong Centre with meager power and autonomy to States. A few critics have gone to the length of saying that India is federal in form but unitary in spirit. This is because the Indian Constitution has itself given too much power to the Centre and very little to the States. This tilt towards over-centralism got further impetus on account of one dominant party rule at the Centre as well as in all the states except Kerala. Unlike other states, Congress lost to the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Kerala and a coalition government came into existence with minority parties of CPI who supported its Left Democratic Front. The political scenario of one-party rule, however, changed in 1967 with the emergence of coalition governments in many of the states of India.

Between 1957 and 2003, there were twelve midterm elections to Kerala's state assembly. Of the eighteen state governments since 1957, only two were led by a single party, and both were short-lived. Congress-led its own United Democratic Front coalition, which alternated in governing Kerala with the Left Democratic Front. (Encyclopaedia.com) Thus, Kerala has shown the way for coalition politics in India.

A pertinent question may arise as to what is a coalition government. What does it convey to the academics? What are its characteristics? The coalition government denotes a cooperative arrangement under which distinct political parties come together to form a government. This happens when there

is a hung parliament or hung assembly. In a parliamentary system that party or group is allowed to form a government that claims to have a majority in the lower house. When one party gets a majority on its own, the question of coalition government does not arise. In case no single party gets a majority in the lower house of a legislature, the situation is called a hung assembly or hung parliament and under such circumstances formation of a coalition government becomes inevitable. Sometimes a minority government that does not have a majority in the legislature is allowed to function with outside support of other parties. V P Singh with only 131 Janata dal MPs formed a minority government in 1989 with outside support of BJP on one hand and CPI, CPM, and other Left parties on the other. Similarly, the Chandrashekhar government in 1991 was also a minority government at the Centre with the outside support of Congress. These governments, technically a coalition formation, were coalition experiments of a different shade.

Western writer William A. Gamson attempted to explain the meaning and understanding of coalition politics. Gamson regards coalition as a 'joint use of resources to determine the outcome of a mixed motive situation involving more than two units' (Gamson:1964, p3). Gamson's assessment of the coalition situation involves three characteristics – Firstly, the use of governmental power by more than one player. Secondly, a mixed-motive situation indicates the existence of conflict and cooperation. And lastly, this is a collective activity that involves the interaction of more than two actors. Indian scholar Iqbal Narain considers the Congress government after the 1969 split as a 'virtual coalition' (Narayan:1976, p 49). The Congress party after the split was in the minority and could

survive in government due to the support of CPI and CPM from outside.

If one attempts to trace the origin of the coalition government in the world, the French polity under the Third and Fourth Republics becomes the starting point. (Nand: 2007, p16) The 'Third Republic', then, had a parliamentary form of government under a multiparty system. Because of a multiplicity of parties, no single political party in France could ever get a majority in the lower house, i.e., National Assembly. This resulted in the formation of coalition governments throughout the existence of the Third Republic. It would not be out of place to mention here that during the seventy years of its existence, the Third Republic witnessed 91 coalition governments. Some lasted for a year, some for months, and some even for a few days only. The 'Fourth Republic' of France had the same experience. Since it also worked under a parliamentary form of government with a multiparty system; it had coalition governments for the entire period of twelve years from 1946 to 1958.

Despite having a multiparty system in a parliamentary form of government, India was spared of coalition politics at the Centre for the first twenty years of its independence because of the towering personalities of a galaxy of charismatic leaders like Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, and Lal Bahadur Shastri. They were at the forefront of the war of independence and freedom struggle under the banner of the Congress party. They commanded the utmost respect of the Indian masses as they were men of integrity, honesty, and political acumen. With the departure of such great leaders from the Indian political scene; opportunism, lust for power, corruption, and all kinds of political vices crept in the Congress. The people were disillusioned and they wanted an alternative to the Congress rule. This resentment fully manifested in the assembly elections of 1967 wherein Congress lost power in eight out of the sixteen states. In these eight states, non-Congress coalition governments emerged. With this, the era of coalition governments in states began and within a decade it overtook the Centre also when the Janata government took the reign of the country. Presently, Indian polity is in the grip of coalition politics.

If one tries to find out the genesis of coalition politics in India, the state of Kerala stands out. Unlike one dominant party rule in the whole of the country after India's independence, Kerala opted for a coalition government since the beginning. It is because of this fact; political analyses have regarded Kerala as the political laboratory of coalition politics in India.

Kerala is first mentioned (as Kerala Putra) in a 3rd-century-BCE rock inscription left by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka. In the last centuries BCE, this region became famous among the Greeks and Romans for its spices (especially pepper). During the first five centuries CE the region was a part of Tamilakam—the territory of the Tamils—and thus was sometimes partially controlled by the eastern Pandya and Chola dynasties, as well as by the Cheras. (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala/History>) Under the Kulasekhara dynasty (c. 800–1102), Malayalam emerged as a distinct language, and Hinduism became prominent.

The present state of Kerala was created by merging the princely states of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar by the State Reorganization Commission based on culture and language. It came into existence on 1st November 1955 by combining Malayalam-speaking regions of the erstwhile regions of Cochin, Malabar, South Canara, and Travancore. It is one of the smallest Indian states rather '21st largest state by area', walled off by the Western Ghats from the rest of India, and washed by the blue water of the Arabian Sea (Pillai:1989, p63) Geographically, it lies along the Arabian sea in the far south of our country. On the North and North East, it is flanked by Karnataka state, and on the East and South lies Tamil Nadu state. Its area of 38,855 square kilometers is just 1.3 percent of the total area of the country.

To understand the political equation of Kerala, it would not be out of place to mention here that the politics of the state centers around its three communities and their inter-caste alignments. The Christians and the Muslims are religious minorities and the Hindu backward classes and castes constitute the majority. (Statistical Handbook Kerala), 2017) the two most important political forces among the Kerala Hindus are mutually antagonistic Nairs and Ezhavas. The Nairs are economically prosperous and have played a pivotal role in Kerala politics. On the other hand, the Ezhavas are economically weak, though they continue to be numerically the most powerful community in the state. (Gidwani :1967, p140) The rivalry between Christians and Nairs and later Ezhavas has been a chronic problem in the politics of Travancore – Cochin. Slowly the Congress in the area became a confederation of communal and caste forces. The rivalry between the Nairs and Ezhavas got submerged in the face of a challenge to the combined political power posed by the Leftist forces spearheaded by the Communist party. The economically weaker communities and classes chose to remain on the side of the Left progressive parties while the privileged sections, irrespective of religion and caste sided with the Congress of Kerala Congress, a breakaway group of the original Congress.

It is most surprising that in no election since 1948, has the Congress party won an absolute majority either in former Travancore – Cochin State or in the subsequent constituent Kerala state of Indian federation. Since 1955, the year of its creation, this tiny southern state always witnessed either minority or coalition governments. At the root of this development are the decline of the Congress vote bank and the rise of regional forces.

In the first election to Kerala Legislative Assembly in 1957, the Communist Party of India got the majority status when five Independents agreed to support them. This situation was like that of Jharkhand. After the creation of Jharkhand in 2000, the NDA partners (BJP and JDU) got the majority status in the assembly only after getting the support of five Independent MLAs. Though the coalition government of Kerala led by CPI was enjoying an absolute majority in the assembly, it was dismissed in 1959 by the Congress government at the Centre. It was irony of the fate that after every assembly election Kerala had a coalition government.

Coalition politics in the state passed through several stages of experimentation and finally settled for a polarized system that provides alternate government. Initially, coalition governments were not very stable and hence could not complete their full term successfully. Some coalition that completed their terms was exception rather than the rule. Kerala had fourteen ministries and nine Chief Ministers from 1957 to 1987. It may be seen that the ministry with the longest term in office was the one under the leadership of C.Achutha Menon and that with the shortest term was the one under K.Karunakaran. The average span of a ministry was slightly more than two years. Since the eighties, coalition governments in Kerala started completing their full term on account of the emergence of bipolar electoral coalitions of the United Democratic Front (UDF) under the leadership of Congress and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) under the leadership of the Marxist party. Political Parties other than Congress (I) and CPI (M) align with UDF or LDF from time to time. The nature of this alliance determines the power structure in Kerala. The possibility of changing sides and entering an alliance that comes to power has enhanced the bargaining capacity of the regional and communal parties like the Kerala Congress, Muslim League, NDP, and SRP. The followers of these parties especially those of Kerala Congress and Muslim League have been the major beneficiaries of alliances, politically and administratively. (Nand:2007, p34) In the 1987 elections, an entirely new realignment took place with all the regional and communal parties joining the bandwagon of the Congress party and all secular parties entering the alliance of the Marxist party. Both in terms of the number of seats secured and the percentage of votes polled, the worst sufferer

was the regional and communal parties causing considerable damage to the electoral fortunes of these parties.

It would be interesting to know why Kerala traversed the political path differently from the one followed by other states of India. Two reasons that restricted the influence of Congress may be assigned: Firstly, the movement initiated by the social reformers, and peasant activists was carried forward to a radical phase by the Communist Left leadership. Secondly, the indifference of the Congress party to implement pro-people program mesa and welfare activities promised to the electorate. The Congress party and their government were more inclined to serve the interest of the ruling classes represented by leading Capitalists and landlords.

The coalition governments in Kerala have some characters of their own. Firstly, the coalition is mostly a pre-election coalition, especially since 1987. Hence, it is free from most of the contradictions that are inherent in post-election coalitions in other states. Secondly, there are only bipolar electoral coalitions of UDF and LDF. Individual parties have almost lost their identities. Lastly, the Indian Muslim League plays a significant role through its loyalty change from election to election due to local compulsions.

Considering the linguistic, social cultural, and developmental diverters, it is but natural for a country like India to throw up the multiparty system and coalition politics as an option for governance. It need not be pursued as a curse but as an opportunity for enhancing democratic legitimacy and national unity. Coalition politics allows accommodating different interests democratically and strengthen the democratic structure itself. When we look back, we can see that the coalition mechanism has protected the country from disintegration as under coalition formation, there is every chance that the voice of different sides would be heard. In the Indian context, we have examples of coalition governments headed by all three hues – Left-led coalition governments in Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura; right of center, one led by BJP and other led by Congress in some states and at Union government level as National Democratic Alliance (NDA) formed in 1998 and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) formed in 2004 respectively. The CPI (M) led government of West Bengal and Tripura shows that even after gaining an absolute majority on its own in state assemblies, the CPI (M) prefers to share with other party members from the Left Front. Similarly, BJP although being ‘the largest party and in the majority on its own in 2014 and 2019 Look Sabah’ in NDA choose to include their constituent parties in government formation accommodating linguistic, social, cultural, and regional

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aspirations of Indian voters. This is a healthy political trend and is in the interest of the nation.

It is thus obvious that Kerala not only showed the path of coalition politics in India but also provided an example of a workable coalition government. The Kerala experience has shown that coalition governments can provide political and administrative stability and indeed produce remarkable results for the benefit of the people. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the coalition politics pursued at the Centre after 1989 had adopted the features of the Kerala model like a common minimum programme, coordination committee, etc. The Congress party which had all along disliked coalition politics has agreed to align with other parties after the Look East election in 2004 for the formation of government at the Centre. This was a non-BJP alliance which came to be known as UPA. Thus, the emergence of coalition governments in Indian politics owes its origin to Kerala.

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