

# The Continuing Relevance of Coalitional Politics in India

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## Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the continuing relevance of coalitional politics in India. It discusses the historical and institutional details of coalitional politics in the post-independence era, especially the dominant trends of the different party systems of the country. Moreover, considering narratives surrounding the return of one-party dominance, it provides an analysis regarding the importance of coalitional politics for the ruling dispensation and opposition in the era of the 4th party system since 2014. Towards that end, the paper will also analyse the BJP's rise in the northeast to illuminate the role played by coalitional politics in influencing electoral outcomes, government formation, ideological reach and narratives, welfare decisions and more. Therefore, the paper successfully proves how coalitional politics remains a crucial factor in shaping the current state of Indian political affairs and how it might continue to do so in the future.

*Keywords: coalitional politics, Indian elections, party system, BJP*

## Context

India is a land of immense social diversity, its citizens speak different languages, profess different religions, practice varied customs, and belong to numerous ethnic groups, which V.S. Naipaul describes as a million mutinies (Naipaul, 2011). Post-independence in 1947, India adopted a Parliamentary form of government, drawing from the Westminster model. This, in

Ambedkar's words would ensure representative democracy offering adequate recognition and space to the depressed classes, and aiming towards creating a more egalitarian society. Despite not being formally there at the time of the making of the constitution, today, coalitional politics has become a major feature of the Indian electoral system-both at the centre as well as at the state level. It has resulted in the stitching together of diverse alliances based on several different factors leading to coalitions. These social coalitions have only continued to multiply and emerge in the form of new, vibrant, and fragmented interest group formations- to even forming new political parties seeking to provide adequate representation. These political parties have acquired a unique position in Indian politics, often affecting electoral outcomes and ideological positions.

The initial party system to gain ascendancy in India could be characterised as one of Nehruvian socialism, with the Congress acting as an umbrella for various political beliefs and ideologies in a model of intra-party competition which Rajni Kothari has aptly termed the 'Congress System' (Kothari, 1964), ensuring effective one-party dominance in India's electoral competition-both national as well as regional. However, competition and cooperation based on coalitions have been a longstanding feature of Indian politics- both at the central and state levels since the genesis of the Indian electoral system. Although, challenges to one-party dominance, as witnessed in the formation of anti-congress coalitions such as the Samyukt Vidhayak Dal in 1967 or, cooperation of the kind witnessed in the support offered to Indira Gandhi's minority government by the communist forces and the DMK in 1969 shows the kind of variety coalition politics offers in India.

Although it is presumed that the Janata Party was a coalition at the national level, it was in fact a single party. Due to the absence of an election defection law, the dissension of various blocks represented different parties, but it was one single party. It was only in 1989 that the coalition era of Indian democracy with different political parties representing a multitude of interest groups, often varied in character and purpose began at the national level with the National Front government led by V.P. Singh. This period also deepened an earlier trend; federalisation of the polity and the emergence of social coalitions based on religion, caste, class, and regional identity that formed governments in several states along with the gregarious application of Schedule-10 of the Constitution, known as the anti-defection law by the Election Commission of India.

In the current period of effective dominance by the BJP since its historic electoral victory in 2014 and further expansion on the same in 2019, some have suggested that India has re-entered a period of one-party dominance (Sridharan, 2022). Owing to the BJP's electoral success and the rise of its ideological narrative of a right-of-centre tilt and focus on Nationalism, Development and Hindutva, it has come to acquire a position of pre-eminence over the body politic of the country.

However, it would not be correct to dismiss the extremely crucial role coalitional politics continues to play- both as an antidote to one-party rule as well as a major reason behind the electoral ascendancy of the ruling dispensation.

### **Coalition: Definition and Institutional Background**

The term coalition is derived from the Latin word "coalitio" which means to grow together. A coalition is a direct descendant of the exigencies of the multi-party system in a democratic setup. It is a phenomenon of multi-party government where a number of majority parties join hands for the purpose of running the government, which is otherwise not possible in a democracy based on a one-party system or a sharp bi-party system. A coalition government is formed when many political parties in the house agree to join hands on a common platform by sinking their broad differences and forming a majority in the house (Ahmed and Nilofer, 2009).

The Constituent Assembly (1946-1949) tasked with preparing the Constitution of India preferred a federated polity with a strong central government. This central bias helped in containing the rich diversity of the Indian nation by placing it in an overarching framework of national philosophy. While this quasi-federal polity ensured a reasonable amount of autonomy for the states, it maintained a strong centre that was indestructible. Throughout the political history of post-independence India, there has been an oscillation between the centralised union and regional-federal tendencies, with both the centre and the state/region displaying periods of dominance at different points in time. In addition, election results are based on the First Past the Post System (FPTP) which is favourable for the rise of a multi-party system, especially for smaller parties due

to the presence of different interest groups. The system of FPTP dictates that whomsoever garners a simple majority of votes- wins in a single constituency.

There are different stages of coalitions in India; they can be clear single majorities, pre-poll understandings amongst parties or post-poll compromises. Parliamentary majorities in India have even been supported by external partners that remain outside the government. Coalitions in India can be “interest” based or “opposition” based. An interest-based coalition would involve the coming together of certain political players along certain common lines for a certain common purpose or reason that is mutually beneficial. These common lines might be ideology, identity, issues, or even electoral expediency. The second type of coalition witnessed in India is an “oppositional” coalition which is formed due to shared opposition space between different political forces, towards another party. To ensure stability and consensus, various mechanisms were also deployed to keep these diverse alliances in check, such as the common minimum programme, the steering committee, inter-ministerial conferences etc. in addition to broad understandings between the constituent forces in parliament (Kailash, 2007).

## **The History of Coalitional Politics in India**

### **1. The One-Party era (1947-1967)**

In the period following Independence, the Congress Party was the pre-eminent political force in the country with a pan-India organization and historical legitimacy arising from its role in the Indian freedom struggle. Initially, the thrust was specifically on the constructive activity of nation-building. This was signified by a national development strategy with leaders such as Syama Prasad Mukherjee, B.R Ambedkar, R.K Shanmukham Chetty, Sardar Baldev Singh, C.H Bhabha and N. Gopaldaswami Ayyangar who were invited to join the cabinet, representing a unity government. This represents the first interest-based coalition of independent India, built around the cause of national development. From 1952 till 1967, the Congress Party continued to dominate the country’s political system nationally and came to acquire the characteristic of “one-party dominance” (Kothari, 1964). It was the party of consensus with internal factionalism and a latent threat from parties outside the margin of pressure acting as competition in the system. Thus, Congress after Independence represented a broad rainbow coalition of interest groups that often held contradictory beliefs representing a catch-all character and acted as an umbrella

organisation, giving space to different political ideologies, castes, classes, religions, regional backgrounds, etc. This was because there was a need for economic reconstruction post World War-2 and the Congress favoured the assimilation of interests facilitated by a centralised brand of federalism (Deb & Sengupta, 2009).

During this period, Congress remained the only viable political force nationally. It also sought to accept regional demands for the creation of states on the basis of language, thereby granting more leeway for identity politics. Several coalition governments were formed in states in this period- by the congress as well as the parties opposed to it. The congress allied with parties such as the Praja Socialist Party in Kerala (1960) or the Gantantra Parishad Party in Orissa (1959) to form a government. Similarly, oppositional coalitions such as the United Democratic Front under Gian Singh Rarewala in PEPSU (1952) or the one formed in 1957 by the CPI with independents in Kerala were also witnessed during this period (Kumar, 2012). However, it is also necessary to note that opposition coalitions formed against the congress did not last long and governments often fell or were dismissed. The same was seen in Kerala in 1959, following the liberation struggle (Vimochana Samaram) orchestrated by the Congress against the Communists (Banerjee, 1986) or in PEPSU following the dismissal of Gian Singh Rarewala's government. Through coercion by extra-constitutional means or co-opting parties in their scheme of national development, the Congress party remained the principal pole or anchor of Indian politics around which all other parties aligned themselves.

## **2. Rise of Anti Congress-ism (1967-1980)**

This period is crucial as it lays the foundation for building non-Congress governments for the first time on a regular basis in states since 1967 (for more information, refer to Table 1). It started with a decline of the Congress's catch-all character and its growing inability to incorporate emerging, different social groups due to entrenched interests. Many ideologically opposed parties came together to form governments that were ideologically heterogeneous on the plank of Anti-Congress-ism inspired by the socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia reaching its zenith with the national coalition of the Janata Party in 1977.

There are four prominent reasons for this; the wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965); a food crisis born out of droughts; economic weakening and a total lack of leadership within the Congress following the death of two prime ministers in quick succession that had created a situation of panic. This led to splits and defections at the regional level by the Congress Party, which led to the formation of new parties in several states. In the 4th Lok Sabha elections, the Congress under Indira Gandhi registered its worst performance, winning a total of 283 seats, down from 361 in the previous national election and was defeated in nine states- Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala (Check Table-1).

Several ideologically disparate coalitions, operating on the common plank of opposition to the congress emerged such as the Samyukt Vidhayak Dal, the Popular United Front, the United Front Ministry, etc. but they did not last long, owing to ideological contentions. Despite the setback to Congress in the body politic of the country, it continued to remain the principal force nationally. But in 1969, the party faced a split between the radicals under Indira Gandhi and the conservatives under Ram Subhag Singh's Congress (O), leading to a minority government at the centre-supported by the DMK and Communists. The Congress Party reversed this situation in the 5th Lok Sabha elections in 1971, with the opposition forming the National Democratic Front, comprising of a "Grand Alliance" (Israel, 1972) of the Jana Sangh, Congress (O), Swatantra Party, and the SSP and Indira Gandhi leading a coordinated campaign of Garibi Hatao, and coming to power with 352 seats. This new Congress of Indira Gandhi was different, it lacked internal dissension and factionalism and was increasingly authoritarian with zero scope for the opposition, unlike the earlier Congress system. This brand of authoritarianism is best characterised by the excessive usage of Article 356 by the union government (Tummala, 1996) to dismiss popularly elected governments in different states during this period. The height of such executive overreach was witnessed in the proclamation of emergency in 1975 and the subsequent trampling of civil liberties (Puri, 1995).

To counter this, many opposition political parties merged under a single banner known as the Janata Party to defeat the congress at the national level in the 1977 elections. Drawing inspiration from Lohia's brand of anti-congress-ism as well as Jayaprakash Narayan's movement against authoritarianism, the Janata party saw coalitions between ideologically diverse partners- from all

ends of the political spectrum. Unfortunately, however, this could not last long enough as the Janata Party saw extreme contentions between different members on issues of ideology and opinion. The Janata Party remained a coalition of different parties and groups and was 'a victim of factionalism, manipulation, and personal ambitions of its leaders' (Chakrobarthy, 2008, page 11). Like the anti-congress state governments formed in 1967, it failed to resolve its own issues and competing interests, which finally culminated in the fall of the Janata Party in 1979.

### **3. The Rise of Regional Forces and the Politics of the Third Front**

The 80s saw a period of unhindered Congress rule at the national level from 1980-1989 resulting in severe anti-incumbency later on, deepening from the erosion that had begun in 1967. The fall of the Janata Government was due to its own internal issues and the clever machinations of Indira Gandhi. This period marked several issues, with respect to security, emanating in states such as Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Jammu & Kashmir. It also saw the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the subsequent loss of her son and political successor, Rajiv Gandhi, in the general elections held five years later in 1989. The elections heralded the start of multi-party coalitional politics at the National level, with no single party able to win a clear majority at the centre. In 1989, the National Front coalition, led by the Janata Dal formed the government and was supported from the outside by the Left and BJP - both of which were ideological enemies. It is important to note that the BJP, in the backdrop of its support for the Rama Janmbhoomi issue had emerged as a principal player in Indian politics following the 1989 elections when it emerged as the third largest party with 85 seats. The 1980s saw the rise of regionalism, facilitated by the decline of the INC as well as the rise of new social groups (Especially in Northern India) that the former was unable to accommodate. Between 1991-1999, regional parties increased their vote share from 26% to 46% (Ziegfeld, 2012). As a result of this, the balance of power was tilted in favour of the states as opposed to the centre in the federal relations of India. This was reflected in the foremost role regional parties played in coalition governments continuously since 1989-whether in the National Front, United Front, UPA as well as NDA governments.

The 90s also saw the increasing visibility of markers of identity- caste, religion, tribe, language etc with the ongoing process of regionalization. This was characterised by the interplay of three

factors- Mandal (Caste), Mandir (Rama-Janmbhoomi dispute), and Market (Economic Liberalization) and the associated ascendancy of interest groups due to these factors. The electoral picture was getting fragmented politically with local/state level actors coming to hold important positions on the federal, but more importantly on the national level in multiple coalitions. This was the period when Lohia-ites such as Nitish Kumar and Mulayam Singh Yadav, Ambedkarites such as Kanshi-Ram and Mayawati and regional leaders from the South such as NTR and later Chandra Babu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh or Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu were able to cement their importance in coalition government making resulting in hitherto latent groups of Indian society getting mobilized and politicized (Navlani, 2006). Many regional parties that emerged during this period were simply the political manifestation of these newly ascendant social coalitions.

Competing interests and establishing prominence led to many controversial decisions such as the Mandal commission reforms (which was itself a ploy by V.P Singh to resolve internal contradictions in the Janata Dal faction) initiated by the National Front government, ultimately leading to its downfall. Another Janata Dal experiment by Chandrashekhar led to the formation of the Janta Dal (Samajwadi) which formed a minority coalition government with outside support from the Congress and met the same fate. The Congress re-emerged in the 1991 elections, partly due to the sympathy of voters for Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Congress under Narsimha Rao eventually formed a minority government which later became a majority after merging the Ajit Singh faction and allying with the JMM, surviving a full term of 5 years but only deepening anti-incumbency, leading to the rise of the BJP. The BJP formed three governments within a span of three years, lasting for 13 days, 13 months and a full term of 5 years. By this point, it had emerged on the national scene as the major political force and efforts were now made by the congress and regional players to undercut the same. Between, 1996-1998, the third front experiment, with Congress's support, was tried twice under the premiership of H. D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral, with not much success. In this sense, one can characterise the cementing bond of coalitional politics in India as negative- where the Anti-Congress-ism starting from the late 1960s eventually came to be replaced by Anti-BJP-ism in the 1990s when it emerged as a national party (Singh, 2001).



#### **4. Towards a growing Bipolarity, contestations between the NDA and the UPA**

A broad two-party competitive coalition contest was seen most prominently between the period of 1998-2014, among the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led UPA. While the NDA remained in power broadly from 1998-2004, the UPA was in power from 2004-2014. This period marked the strength that smaller parties demonstrated in policy decision-making. The BJP had to back down on its demand of the Mandir, Article 370 and Uniform Civil Code to remain in the alliance. Congress, on the other hand, had to face the ire of the Left for accepting the Indo-US Nuclear deal. This led to BJP and the Congress deciding on a common minimum program, handing out suitable ministerial berths to allies and accommodating them in policy decisions. Although the Congress Party made a spectacular gain in the 2009 elections, winning 206 seats, it could not remain in the driver's seat, often at the mercy of allies. In fact, it had a difficult time removing corrupt ministers as allies exercised full control over minister portfolios. This era was characterized by a significant decline in the power of the Central Government, with diminished control. This growing bipolarity is not to suggest that Duverger's law finally took hold in India, indeed as we have seen, the process of regionalization and fragmentation continued well into this period (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2009), however, a broad consensus emerged around two competing ideas of national development. The Jana Sangh, the ideological predecessor of the BJP, held national unity facilitated by a centralized brand of federalism as one of its key features (Deb & Sengupta, 2009), like the Congress party post-Independence. In such a scenario, both these parties represented a unique dichotomy of ideologies grounded in a shared sense of national presence, as such the politics of the Indian state naturally came to revolve around them and their allies in a broad bipolar contest.

#### **5. 2014 and towards a BJP-centred polity**

There are many factors towards the rise of the BJP and the result of 2014 but the most important one is that there was a total lack of hope with the Congress-led UPA, while the Narendra Modi-led BJP-NDA represented both change and hope. The second UPA government (2009-2014) had rampant corruption and misgovernance coupled with policy paralysis, in part due to coalition weaknesses. By the time of the election of 2014, the Congress Party had already lost many allies,

becoming very unpopular resulting in BJP achieving a single-party majority for the first time, and a party achieving a single-party majority since 1984.

BJP achieved this success on the back of Modi's popularity and growing acceptance along with the Sangh Parivar's organisational strength and with the BJP's ideological Hindutva project, which led many political commentators to declare that the era of coalitional politics was finally over. It is the opinion of many, especially after the victory of the BJP in the 2019 elections that India has officially entered its 4th party system (Vaishnav & Hinton, 2019). As such, the central pole or anchor of Indian politics, of the kind seen during the Nehru-era has returned with the BJP now occupying a position of preponderance with its catch-all Hindutva character which resembles the Congress system in its heyday. The BJP is now present beyond the cow belt in areas such as North-East and South India where it was considered a pariah. However, to suggest that coalitional politics has played no role during this era of BJP dominance would be incorrect. Indeed, coalitional politics continues to persist prominently at the central as well as the state level and is often used by both the ruling alliance and the opposition to meet its ends.

### **Post-2014 narratives surrounding the 4th dominant party system of India**

The Indian political landscape, at least since the late 1980s has been exceptionally fragmented politically, especially with the rise of new interest groups and the ascendancy of erstwhile backward classes in several different states (Jaffrelot, 2000). While political development has taken place with regard to a possible second coming of a consensus-based national ideology in the form of Hindutva, politics is still highly representation/interest-based as opposed to issue-based. This often manifests itself in the emergence of interest group-based political parties that are generally representatives of a particular caste/community in a region. Against the backdrop of this phase of demographic and socio-economic change, the BJP witnessed its rise politically and consolidation post-2019, prompting some to state that it may have successfully created a consensus around the concept of ethnopolitical majoritarianism (Chibber & Verma, 2019). Since the BJP's initial victory in 2014, political commentators have signalled the end of coalitional politics and the rise of India's second dominant party system. However, quite dissimilar from Kothari's initial model of parties operating on the margins of pressure- either inside the Congress or outside as a latent threat, regional parties in the era of BJP dominance have successfully operated as independent forces, shifting power dynamics in different states by allying with the

opposition or the ruling dispensation. A case in point is Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) which has been able to swing back and forth from the BJP to the RJD-Congress alliance with ease, in order to remain dominant electorally. Thus, there is apparent fluidity of choice.

Coalition politics has continued to remain relevant. Of the 42 state assembly elections that have been conducted since the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, coalition governments have been formed in 20 of them. Out of these 20, 8 have been opposition alliances against the BJP-led NDA coalition. Quite unlike the pre-1967 era of the first dominant party system, coalitional politics plays an important role for the BJP as well as the non-BJP forces and hasn't been rendered inconsequential. This would suggest that the post-2014 era is not, strictly speaking, an era of pure one-party dominance but rather that there has been a return of one party as the focal point or anchor of Indian politics around which all other parties have reconfigured themselves.

#### **Anti-BJP forces in the post-2014 era**

An important question to ask, however, is where does the opposition figure into all of this? After all, in at least six states (Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Bihar, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) there is an opposition alliance in power, with a Congress presence in four states. In the post-2014 era, the opposition has been increasingly seen to form negative coalitions. That is when political parties join and come together with the sole objective of pulling down the government already in power. That negative coalitions are the norm in India has been well established, moving first from negative coalitions against the Congress and then switching to the BJP in the 1990s.

Reminiscent of the anti-congress coalitions of 1967, opposition coalitions in present times too indicate growing instability- borne out of ideological mismatch as was seen in the erstwhile MVA alliance in Maharashtra, inter-party factionalism such as in Madhya Pradesh or even engineered defections- such as in Karnataka in 2019. These alliances are rooted in turmoil due to various reasons- both external as well as internal. Currently, the opposition is devoid of a common narrative or plank on which it could counter the BJP nationally, its alliances are unpragmatic and often end up hurting it (Verma, 2022), and its leaders refuse to form common

minimum programmes as has been witnessed in previous coalitions, nor have there been any interest-based coalitions as the sole objective has been centred around “stopping the BJP”.

Increasingly, the credentials of congress have also been called into question. There is growing nervousness regarding the future of the party, its declining national footprint, the steady exodus of leaders due to entrenched status-quo and ideological incoherence owing to a lack of newer ideas or issues has led to its dwindling fortunes. The result of this has been that the grand old party is no longer viewed as a central pole in Indian politics- a large party around which smaller oppositional forces might gather. Instead, that space is now seen to be up for grabs with parties such as the AAP or TMC projecting national ambitions in recent memory.

Nevertheless, there is growing clamour surrounding the importance of “opposition unity” in the anti-BJP space in Indian politics. The inability to build a broad consensus regarding the same mainly stems from state-level equations with multiple opposition parties opposed to each other- as is seen in West Bengal, Punjab, Kerala etc. The Congress has also been criticised for its inability in creating a broad alliance of opposition forces and has alternatively favoured state-level alliances such as in Bihar or Jharkhand with the formation of Mahagathbandhans.

While brief attempts have been made in recent memory for the creation of a coalition of non-Congress regional forces, with the formation of the federal front between BRS (formerly TRS), TMC and AAP in 2019, broadly speaking, opposition unity surrounding a new third front is largely absent. The prospect of a regional party alliance also seems attractive because so far only the sub-national, linguistic-based parties have proven to be reliable identity-based counters to the politics of Hindutva. In regions like the northeast or the south in Telangana, the BJP has been able to replace the Congress or the Left but when facing regional parties such as the BJD or the TMC, it has been soundly defeated. Until there is a wholesale decline of regional forces in India, alliance politics will largely remain relevant (Phadnis, 2022).

Nevertheless, positive, or negative, coalition formation by the opposition is prevalent and has acquired a unique identity in an era of BJP dominance. Moreover, until a viable national

alternative emerges, it is likely that the opposition will have to continue to rely on coalitions to meet the ruling dispensation head-on.

### **Coalition formation in the 4th party system- the BJP's rapid rise in the North East**

The BJP's national footprint has steadily increased since its initial victory in 2014, this has perhaps been most apparent in its expansion in the northeast. The BJP has treated the region as a whole, ensuring it gets visibility both politically and economically, while giving respect to its culture. Although the entire Northeast comprises 25 Lok Sabha seats only, there are huge repercussions with respect to security and geographical access to East Asia. This is best reflected in BJP's inroads in Assam which had been a combination of ideological narrative and political pragmatism (Tripathi et.al, 2018), its alliance with AGP and BPF not only granted it legitimacy but also prevented a split in the anti-congress votes in addition to fragmenting the vote base of the opposition. To this effect, the BJP post its win in the 2016 Assam elections decided to form the North-Eastern Democratic Alliance after which it has only continued to grow and consolidate its electoral strength. The NEDA in Himanta Biswa Sarma's words, who serves as the national convenor, was "to improve coordination among NDA partners in NE states and strengthen their base in the region, in addition to ensuring speedy development and good governance". It allied with and co-opted several regional parties and political leaders on a broad plank of anti-Congress sentiment, the result being that currently the BJP and its coalition partners in NEDA are in power in all eight states in the region with the BJP directly governing in four.

BJP-led NEDA employed various strategies; pre-poll understandings in Assam or post-poll alliances such as in Meghalaya- the BJP was able to win one state at a time; It also relied on the strategy of co-opting powerful leaders by engineering splits and defections in opposition parties, as was seen in 2016 in Arunachal Pradesh when the INC-led Pema Khandu government defected en-masse, first to the PPA and then to the BJP.

In addition to electoral calculations, the BJP was also able to build upon ideologically by displaying flexibility in dealing with regional identities, while simultaneously assimilating them into the broad Hindutva narrative. For instance, quite unlike the BJP's ideological outreach in the Hindi heartland, it focused on adapting local cults and symbols such as those associated with

Kamakhya and Sankardev-Sattra traditions (Tripathi et.al, 2018). Similarly, in the more Christian-dominant states such as Manipur or Nagaland, the BJP's policy of adapting to the local conditions is reflected in how Christian leaders of the party call it the "Bharatiya Jesus Party", with the Sangh running book banks and health camps for Christian groups (Uttam, 2018) (for more information, refer to Table 2).

The latter too played an important part in this outreach, through development programs, facilitated by the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, an organisation that runs health and education services for the tribal communities, and Seva projects, which are aimed at offering help in deprived and remote areas. Moreover, it also tried to reach out to traditionally reticent groups such as the Nagas through demands for awarding a Bharat Ratna to Rani Gaidinliu, the legendary Naga freedom fighter in addition to the valorisation of Indian freedom fighters popular in the region such as Subhash Chandra Bose (Gupta, 2018).

This points out the importance of coalitions in building a broad-minded alliance to take care of the various aspirations of the people of the northeast. It also points out the ways in which a national party like the BJP gains prominence through coalition innovation by carving out separate institutions to take care of the interests of coalition partners. Yet, the NEDA also represents an attempt to re-alter the way in which coalition politics is used to alter the landscape of politics in the Northeast.

### **Conclusion- what does the future hold?**

The BJP's rise in the northeast was entirely predicated on coalitional politics. The simple reason behind its dependence on the same was because India is too diverse demographically for a single party to represent a multiplicity of interest groups, this is not just apparent in the North-East but also in other states such as Uttar Pradesh where the BJP has allied with the NISHAD party and AD(S) or in Goa where it is allied with the GFP and the MGP. The BJP's coalitions-either interest-based or opposition based are centred around either ideology, identity, issues, or electoral expediency. Coalition governments allow a party to build strong social coalitions that offer electoral stability and ideological extension to hitherto unintegrated communities as well as affect development and welfare decisions. The final point is quite interesting to note, the BJP's campaign

in the North-East was a developmental campaign as well, long years of Congress rule had stymied the prospects of the region which prompted the BJP to make promises aimed towards securing the same while simultaneously being conscious of the cultural background of the respective states. In many ways, it further emboldens the point that issue-based politics has seen a rise in India and coalition formation might also be along the line of issues in addition to ideology and identity, as has been witnessed previously.

In fact, one of the major reasons behind the rise of the BJP individually since the 1990s till now has also been centred around the alliances it has struck (Heath, 1999)- at the national level as well as the state level. In Goa, for instance, the BJP's alliance with the MGP and its subsequent cannibalization of the party's traditional vote base allowed it to emerge as one of the principal players in the politics of the state. Yet, it continues to ally with the MGP. Similarly, in Bihar, the BJP – which was until very recently a junior partner to the JD(U) emerged as the single largest party in the 2020 assembly elections. Even in the historic 2014 Lok Sabha elections, of the 282 seats won by the BJP, as many as 57 seats were accounted for by states in which the BJP depended significantly on coalition partners. These are Maharashtra (23 seats), Bihar (22), Haryana (7), Andhra Pradesh (2), Punjab (2), and Tamil Nadu (1) (Farooqui & Sridharan, 2014). Alliances have offered the BJP both opportunities to expand individually as well as gain a foothold in regions where it has no traditional presence- such as in Punjab with the SAD, Tamil Nadu with the AIADMK and PMK and Puducherry with the AINRC.

Moreover, as previously hypothesized in 2014, it won't be a stretch to suggest that the party will continue to rely on coalitions in the future for government formation in states where it cannot expect to win by itself. However, a caveat might be added here that the dwindling number of NDA allies might suggest that the BJP plans to expand its individual presence, which might further point to the possibility of it eventually becoming a pure-one party dominant system down the line. Realistically, however, this is quite unlikely presently and might take a long time to actualize. All of this is not to suggest that the era of coalitional politics of the kind witnessed from 1989 to 2009 is still ongoing, rather it means that it hasn't become entirely irrelevant and remains a consequential part of the 4th party system. Therefore, in an era of supposed one-party dominance,

the BJP is in an alliance of some sort, either as a junior partner or a senior partner in 11 out of 16 states in which the ruling NDA is in power.

Politics in India is essentially representational, characterised by the emergence, politicisation, and organisation of new interest groups- based on ideology, identity, or issues. Relevant literature on the emergence of political parties suggests that factors such as cultural diversity or economic inequality might result in the formation of the same (Harmel & Robertson, 1985). India's political history has seen the ascendancy of emerging interest groups since Independence and with growing economic development and political outreach, these communities are bound to get more mobilized and manifest themselves as political parties. The same was witnessed in the post-Mandal era with the rise of the OBCs on the national scale, with the rise of Hindutva forces following the Rama Janmbhoomi Movement and in recent memory with the rise of the AAP following the 'India Against Corruption' movement. If this representational form of interest group formation continues, coalitional politics in India will continue unhindered as no single party would be able to acquire a catch-all character. The trends certainly point towards that, with the formation of new constituencies under the new national delimitation plan in 2026, the emergence of new interest groups is only bound to increase.

While the BJP has been seen to emerge as the predominant political party of India, it still requires coalitions in several parts of the country to increase its catchment area for extending its social coalitions to newly formed interest groups. These coalitions serve multiple purposes- ideological as well as electoral. Moreover, it has not yet breached the regional fortresses, unable to build its own base, especially in South India despite trying various alliance configurations.

Moreover, while it is true that the BJP has not yet attained a hegemonic position in Indian politics, recent developments surrounding the exit of multiple NDA partners in key states such as Punjab, Bihar and Maharashtra suggest that the BJP might be attaining a more monolithic character. This might point to a future where it may seek to contest alone and win in areas where it previously required a coalition to emerge as the larger party. So, while we are not in an era of true one-party dominance of the kind during the 1950s, we very well may see that as a possibility in the future (Hebbar, 2022).



The opposition on the other hand has recognised that the progressive electoral deterioration of the Congress on the national and state level has opened space for new contenders that might benefit electorally by allying with each other. Some may choose to deny the BJP's pan-India aspirations by fielding coalitions in states such as Jharkhand, Bihar, or Tamil Nadu. Others might seek to form coalitions for increasing their national footprint and provide an alternative to the Hindu-Welfarism model of the BJP. Examples of the latter might be seen in the alliances built by the AAP with the BTP in the run-up to the 2022 Gujarat Elections or those built by the TMC in the 2022 Goa elections. Moreover, the rising discourse of sub-nationalism in India- both by the Congress as well as the non-Congress opposition points again to the oscillation and contestation between the two differing perspectives of centralised union and regional federalism. A future that witnesses the decline of the BJP's political fortunes might be predicated on the same unless a viable national alternative arises.

In conclusion, this process of coalition formation is only bound to increase with the passage of time. It might be due to the BJP's need to expand to hitherto untouched territory, the congress-led opposition's negative coalitions to keep the BJP out of power, the formation of a regional-parties led third front or even the emergence of a new national-level party as an alternative to the congress. Coalitional politics is here to stay and ironically, even its removal would probably require its operation initially – thereby signifying its exceptional relevance for the time being.

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Table 1

## Performance of Political Parties – 1967 Legislative Assembly Elections

State	National Parties								Regional Parties										IND	Grand Total	Non-Congress Coalition formed
	BJS	CPI	CPM	INC	PSP	RPI	SSP	SWA	JKD	KEC	MUL	JAC	ADM	ADS	DMK	FBL	BAC	FBL	-		
Haryana*	12	0	0	48	0	2	0	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	81	United Front (Haryana)
Bihar	26	24	4	128	18	1	68	3	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	33	318	Samyukt Vidhayak Dal
Kerala	0	19	52	9	0		19	0	-	5	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	133	Seven Party Alliance
MP*	78	1	0	167	9	0	10	7	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	22	296	Samyukt Vidhayak Dal
Orissa	0	7	1	31	21		2	49	-	-	-	26	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	140	Swatantra-Jana Congress
Punjab	9	5	3	48	0	3	1	0	-	-	-	-	54	10	-	-	-	-	229	362	Popular United Front
Tamil Nadu	0	2	11	51	4	0	2	20	-	-	-	-	-	-	137	1	-	-	6	234	DMK led-United Front
Uttar Pradesh*	98	13	1	199	11	10	44	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	37	425	Samyukt Vidhayak Dal
West Bengal	1	16	43	127	7	0	7	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	34	13	31	280	United Front (West Bengal)

Notes – BJS, Bharatiya Jana Sangh; CPI, Communist party of India; INC, Indian National Congress; PSP, Praja Socialist Party; RPI, Republican Party of India; SSP, Samyukt Socialist Party; SWA, Swatantra Party; JKD, Jana Kranti Dal; KEC, Kerala Congress; MUL, Muslim League; JAC, Jana Congress; ADM, Akala Dal Master Tara Singh Group; ADS, Akali Dal Sant Fateh Singh Group; DMK, Dravida Munitra Kazhagam; FBL, Forward Bloc; BAC, Bangla Congress; IND, Independent.

\*Signifies the states where the congress faced defections after the 1967 elections and lost its majority

Source- Election Commission of India, <https://eci.gov.in/search/?q=1967%20&quick=1>

**Table 2**

**The BJP's rising vote-share in Manipur since the 2007 Assembly elections**

Year	Vote Share (%)
2007	0.85%
2012	2.12%
2017	36.28%
2022	37.8%

Source- Election Commission of India, <https://eci.gov.in/files/category/81-manipur/>