

Coalition Politics in India : The Post Emergency Janata Experiment

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Abstract

The socio-economic turmoil of the 1970s was converted into a political opportunity by the leaders of the opposition parties irrespective of ideological differences. Such an attempt galvanized the mutually opponent political parties into a single political identity called Janata Party which successfully replaced the dominant Indian National Congress from the centre of power at the Raisina Hills of New Delhi. Though it could not survive for its full term but it was able to send a message that the one party dominance may be successfully challenged. The present paper intends to explore the reasons of coming together of political power on the one hand and the crumbling down of the first coalitional government at the national level.

Key Words

Emergency , MISA, Election, Predominance, Fractured Mandate, Ideology, Common Minimum Programme.

The systemic turmoil witnessed within the sub-systems of party system in the 1967 gradually kept on maturing and mutating which ultimately emerged at the national level in 1977. Replicating almost the same political process of coming together of political parties as was seen at the state level in 1967, this first experiment of coalition (technically it was merger of political parties into one identity , called Janata Party) politics at the larger political screen of the national political arena virtually signaled an alarm bell for the deepening crisis in the Congress system .However, the political vacuum created by low pressure political cyclone of pre-emergency pan India people's agitations in general and student's mobilization in particular created a conducive political temperature against the predominant party system which suffered a major blow in the post-emergency election. In fact, the electoral upsurge of 1967 not only brought about qualitative change in the party system at the state level but also reflected a growing concern of regional political elites to emulate this model of consociational coalition at the Union level as well. The growing strength of the opposition parties in general and regional parties in particular got a perfect political environment in 1977 which led to conversion of socio-economic dissent of the Demos into second electoral upsurge whereby predominance was replaced by pre/post election realignment of political parties that ensured establishment of first coalition government at the centre. Any contextual analysis of the factors responsible for this far reaching change in the Indian party system would distinctly display that no doubt the opposition united to ride the post emergency tidal wave of anti incumbency mood of the disenchanted people but the fact remains that such a volcanic political situation was an outcome of growing mass unrest due to worsening political economy of the country which led to large scale industrial unrest, railway strike, student's

agitation and the call of ‘Total Revolution’ by Jai Prakash Narayan. ‘It demonstrates unique beauty of Indian federalism which is seen in creating space for accommodative reconciliation of regional aspirations within the crucial framework of national policy. In fact, evolutionary trajectory of parties clearly reflects the federalising attributes of the party system. The losses suffered by the Congress in 1967 at the state level followed by the same result at the national level in 1977 is attributed to its negation of democratic tenets along with rising centralization which not only eroded it’s federal character but also proved vital for the emergence of coalition politics in India’.(Chakrabarty Bidyut, Forging Power: Coalition Politics in India, New Delhi : Oxford University Press,2006 ,p 95).In fact, the 1975-77 Emergency period ought to be treated as a ‘defining moment’ for coalition politics in India as it ‘permitted or rather provoked, the forging of the federal coalition to capture power at the centre’.(Balveer Arora, ‘Negotiating Differences: Federal Coalitions and National Cohesion’ in Francine R Frankel et.al(eds), Transforming India:Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p 180).

Theoretically speaking , the intellectual traditions of short lived coalition politics at the central-level in 1977 can be traced in the ‘Total Revolution’ of JP who himself relied on Ram Manohar Lohia’s following seven political commandments of revolutionary changes:

- i)Gender/man-woman equality;
- ii)removal of colour based inequality;
- iii)removal of social inequality and caste and provision of special opportunities;
- iv)opposition of colonialism and foreign rule;
- v)maximum realisable economic equality;
- vi)ensuring privacy and democratic rights; and
- vii)opposition of weapons of mass destruction.

(Limaye , Madhu,1994, Janata Party Experiment: An Insider’s Account of Opposition Politics,1977-80, New Delhi, DK Publishers, vol.2,p 542). “ J.P found in this formulation the ideological roots of opposition coalition. So, his effort to further the cause of opposition unity was a fulfillment of the promise that the aborted Lohia experiment of 1967 had made.” (Chakrabarty Bidyut, Coalition Politics in India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2014). The seeds of total revolution began to take shape of a new political entity within the premises of Tihar jail where most of the opposition leaders were lodged during the emergency. The initiative was taken by Sri Prakash Singh Badal who mooted the idea of coming together of opposition parties by submerging their identities into a common identity supported by a common socio-economic and political agenda .(Darbara Singh, Indian Politics, Sandeep Prakashan,Delhi, 1978, p 98). The resultant output came in the form of Janata Party which consisted of Jana Sangh, Congress(O),Socialist Party, Bhartiya Lok Dal, Congress For Democracy, erstwhile component of Swatantra Party, and leaders like Chandrasekhar, Krishna Kant etc who had deserted Congress party as they had opposed to declaration of emergency. (A S Narang, Indian Government and Politics, Geetanjali Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000,p 362). It was agreed among the constituents that the party would field common candidate under the symbol of Janata Party. As a result it fielded candidates of diametrically opposed parties, such as Akali Dal, Bhartiya Janasangh and Left parties , under its banner. It reflected the strong anti congress resolve among ideologically heterogeneous parties which prompted the respective leaders to forge united fight in the upcoming electoral battle. The credit for such unity is attributed to the passionate pragmatic appeal of J P which acted as a political adhesive of unified politico-electoral challenge to the

dominant Congress party. This unique experimentation of keeping the ideological differences at the back burner has been beautifully articulated by Prof. Bidyut Chakrabarty, who is of the opinion that “J P’s success in cementing the bond suggested a possibility of political unity despite serious differences in class terms. This resulted in the Socialists agreeing to downplay its ideological schism with other constituents in post-Emergency. Further, the class character of the BLD never stood in the way while forming a coalition in which a completely opposite BJS was a significant partner.” (Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Forging Power: Coalition Politics in India*, Oxford, University Press, New Delhi, 2006, p105 ; For details of this argument see T V Sathyamurthy, *State and Society in a Changing Political Perspective*, in T V Sathyamurthy (ed.), *Class Formation and Political Transformation in Post-Colonial India*, Vol.4, Oxford University Press, 1996, p446). The more striking development in the democratic demography of Indian politics was decision of the RSS backed BJS to join hands with its *bête noire* in Indian politics. This perceptible change in its ideological positioning was based on Bala Sahab Deoras’s pragmatic realisation according to which, ‘to remain in the mainstream of national politics, the RSS should opt for a politics of accommodation’ by redefining its exclusivist ideological identities. (Pralay Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst With Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2002, pp, 184,85). In fact, this cataclysmic political change was inspired by dictatorial degeneration of democracy during emergency which had convinced the opposition parties that unless they forge united electoral alternative to the people at this crucial moment of their political journey their survival itself would be in danger. The Janata Party, therefore, came into existence ‘primarily because the experience of emergency convinced them that their existence was in danger and the sixth Lok Sabha elections in March 1977 might be a last opportunity for them to challenge the Congress party’s domination over Indian politics’ (The Statesman, Calcutta, January, 1977).

The new political entity, no doubt, was a conglomeration of ideologically incompatible parties but the coming together was based on a formal common minimum programme which reflected dilution of ideological differences. This document of electoral promises reflected their understanding of socio-economic and political necessities which was to address almost all the contemporary issues of the civil society. The broader contours of these programmatic promises are reflected in the manifesto of Janata Party which declared its commitment to : repeal/withdraw the external Emergency (the continuing external emergency since Indo-Pak war of 1971) and the internal Emergency which was imposed in 1975; repeal/nullify the draconian enactments like MISA; revoke those laws which took away basic human /fundamental rights including freedom of press ;do away with notorious 42nd amendment Act and ensure release of political prisoners who were put behind the bars for resisting the previous regime. The basic aim of such an intended attempt was to reassure restoration of freedoms which were undemocratically snatched away by the previous regime. In the realm of economic restructuring of the society the manifesto pledged to : do away with the discriminatory right to private property from the justiciable list of fundamental rights; emphasise on right to work and guarantee removal of unemployment in fifteen years. In the realm of social restructuring the focus of the manifesto was on reform of education and removal of illiteracy.(A detailed deliberative discussion can be found in Granville Austin ,*Working of a Democratic Constitution*, OUP, New Delhi, 2000, pp 398-400.) In fact a careful scrutiny of the prospective programmes of the Janata Party as promised in the manifesto would reveal that an earnest effort was made to accommodate ideological commitments of almost all the constituents. It included :anti planning plank of the Swatantra Party; the ideological commitment of swadeshi/national self reliance of BJS; many pet

ideological commitments of the Socialist groups etc. In economic vision document it relied on balancing the interests of the influential rural nobles and the bourgeoisie. Overall such a contradictory patchwork was seriously flawed.(Kristoffel leiten, Janata as a Continuity of the System, Social Scientist, January, 1991 as quoted in A S Narang: op.cit, p 363). This neo-political initiative of the inclusive politico-electoral war cry against the Congress regime started gaining momentum throughout the length and breadth of the country as the people at large were convinced by their campaign against emergency which led to suspension of fundamental rights and civil liberties, indiscriminate and arbitrary detention of people, censorship of mass media, compulsory family planning involving forced sterilization and other draconian measures. (Arshi Khan, Coalition Politics in India Since 1967, in Akhtar Majeed(ed): Coalition and Power Sharing, Manak Publications, New Delhi, 2000, p 155).

As expected the people's voice proved mightier than the uninterrupted Congress regime as the verdict of post emergency sixth Lok Sabha election decimated its past electoral fortune to ashes. In the newly constituted Lok Sabha with 539 seats, the Janata Party secured 270 seats. Its other constituents, Congress for Democracy got 28 seats, Akali Dal won 8 seats and the CPI (M) came out victorious in 28 seats. The Congress could not open its electoral account in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, U.P. and Rajasthan. Though Mrs. Gandhi was blessed to occupy a seat in the Lok Sabha from Andhra Pradesh but she lost her traditional winning seat from U.P. The Southern region, however, did not sweep away the Congress. Overall, most of the long serving Congress leaders suffered humiliating defeats whereas most of the prominent leaders of the Janata Party and its supportive constituents came out victorious. Symbolising their faith in Gandhian methodology of resisting and replacing the dictatorial governance based on misuse of state apparatuses the newly elected law makers of the Janata Party and Akali Party visited Raj Ghat on March 22, 1977 in the presence of JP and JB Kriplani and vowed to: uphold the civil and political rights; promote national unity and promote austerity and honesty in personal and public life.(T.O.I, New Delhi, March 23, 1977). Thereafter, these elected MPs assembled at Gandhi Peace Foundation where JP and Kriplani succeeded in getting Morarji Desai unanimously accepted as the leader of the Janata Party who eventually assumed office of Prime Minister on March 24, 1977.(ibid, March 23 and 24, 1977). Both JP and Kriplani, being the chief architects of this coming together of parties, not only attended a convention of the Janata Party on May 01, 1977 but ensured strengthening of the party by formal merger of BLD, Congress(O), Socialist and Jana Sangh.(TOI, May, 02, 1977). It was followed by Congress for Democracy on May, 05, 1977.(ibid, May, 06, 1977). The Janata Party began its executive inning by dissolving nine Congress ruled state assemblies and holding fresh elections in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal, Rajasthan, Odisha and West Bengal.(TOI, New Delhi, April, 05, 1977). Elections to these assemblies were held along with Tamil Nadu and Jammu and Kashmir in June 1977. Except Tamil Nadu and Jammu and Kashmir the Janata Party came to power either on its own or with the support of its supportive alliance partners. Thus, the electoral triumph of the Janata Party became pan Indian as it could gain power not only in the centre but in many states of the union as well.

This landslide victory, however, was not only a reflection of outright rejection of wrong doings by the Congress regime during emergency but more so because of extraordinary socio-economic and political remedial recourse promised by the Janata Parties and its allies. The expected turn around needed a miracle by the new dispensation which was doubted by the critique of Indian political system. In fact, they were sceptical of survival of this politically expedient experiment as ideologically distancing of the parties was bound to cause natural death of this new political entity which remained burdened

with insoluble inherent contradictions. “The euphoria over the victory of the Janata Party coalition was short lived. Once the government was formed, holding the party together was a major preoccupation of the leaders. The government received frequent jolts by the constant bickering and infighting in the party, both at the Centre and in the states.” (Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Forging Power*, Oxford University Press. New Delhi,2006, p 107). It was evident in the ongoing internal dissension in the government as two senior cabinet colleagues namely Jagjivan Ram and Charan Singh were finding it difficult to hide their aspirations for the top job which was occupied by Morarji Desai. Furthermore, as suggested by CP Bhambari, the heterogeneity and diversity in Janata got diluted not only because all the Janata actors were primarily well entrenched in the Northern states but all of them intended to pierce each other’s political constituency. Moreover, the merger of political parties into new political entity did not usher automatic unifying act by their trade unions, youth wings, farmers organizations and other frontal organizations as these continued to remain not only outside political umbrella of the Janata Party but kept on working at cross purposes which was destined to brew fissures in the party.(C P Bhambari, *The Janata Party- A Profile*, National, Delhi, 1983, p15). Thus, Janata party which aroused the hope of a viable political alternative of Congress could not prove the critiques wrong as it remained essentially not only a coalition of different parties and groups but a victim of resultant factionalism, manipulation and personal ambitions of its leaders.(Bipan Chandra, *India after Independence*, p 264; as quoted by Bidyut Chakrabarty, in *Forging Power*, p107-08). The superficial unity soon started evaporating under the heated polemics among the major constituents as they tried to maximize their particular partisan interests.

Unfortunately, the internal bickering started getting a bipolar shape on the issue of dual membership of BJS. While non-BJS constituents of the Janata party insisted for delinking their relationship with the RSS they refused to oblige which precipitated the inherent contradictions. The imminent danger of disintegration began with dropping of two JanaSangh ministers in the U.P by the chief minister, Ram Naresh Yadav for their alleged violation of the Janata election pledge of discarding communal pursuits in the interest of harmony among the multi-religious communities in India.(TOI,29 February,1979, quoted in Bidyut Chakrabaty, *Forging Power* ,OUP, New Delhi,2006, p 108). It was seen by the BJS stalwarts as a deliberate attempt to malign and marginalize its political ideology which was against the foundational ‘catholicity of the constituents’.(L K Advani’s press statement in Lucknow on 29 February 1979, *The Indian Express*,30 February 1979, as quoted in Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Forging Power* ,p108). Before this issue could be resolved another political crisis engulfed the Janata Party when in June 1979, Charan Singh resigned from Home minister .Though Charan Singh was persuaded to join back as minister of Finance. However, he succeeded in aligning with Socialists to raise the issue of dual membership of Jana Sangh which ultimately led to a break up in the party and the government. On the other hand Raj Narain also resigned from the ministry and floated a new political outfit namely Janata (secular) as he did not want to be a part of the cabinet which include ‘communal Jana Sagh’.(*The Hindustan Times*,13 June, 1979). The final blow came in the form of indirect attack on the Prime Minister by the opposition who raised the charges of corrupt practices by his son Kanti Desai. The Congress party was quick enough to bring no confidence motion in July through Y V Chauhan as its political sixth sense had indicated that the ongoing personalised intra party/factional feud had weakened the Janata government so much that even a mild push could bring it down. And it happened in the same fashion as resignations of several ministers and the decision by the BLD and Socialists to desert the party created such an embarrassing moment for the government that it not only became a minority government but even forced

Morarji Desai to resign on 15 July 1979 without facing no confidence motion. This brought to an end the first major attempt to form a coalition government at the centre.

The above analytical description of the attempted cohabitation of political parties irrespective of ideological differences raised hope among the political scientists that the political churning of electoral democracy is gearing up to enter the phase of probable Bi-party system. It appeared that anti congress forces may have taken cue from the success of regional parties in states in 1967. Though this attempted political/ electoral coup could not survive long due to clash of personalities but it certainly reflected the possibility of imminent threat to predominant party system in the foreseeable future. Another significant development of this experiment was the willingness of RSS dominated Jansangh or B.J.P to toe the centrist line if necessary. But the post Janata experiment also witnessed erosion and fragmentation of socialist movement as many state centric political parties were born thereafter from the same ideological lineage. These developments proved significant from the point of view of party system as it led the foundation of weakening of the predominant system and enhanced the chances of more competitive party system. Yogendra Yadav has tried to encapsulate this development from the prism of deepening of democracy which succeeded in creating first democratic upsurge whereby the Predominant/Congress system suffered a major jolt in the electoral battle at the state level. Though it signaled increased competitive nature of the party system at the state level but the Congress system did not face any challenge at the national level for almost a decade. However he does not sigh away from arguing that this democratic upsurge has prepared the ground for diminishing returns of the INC in the years to come which was reflected during the post emergency electoral debacle of the INC in 1977 . In other words he could visualize the imminent change in the existing one party dominant system at the national level of party competition as well. (Yogendra Yadav, Electoral Politics in the Time of Change : India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99, Economic and Political Weekly, August 21-28,1999, p 2394).

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