



## **WORKING OF INDIAN FEDERALISM: 1947-2008**

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### **Introduction**

Indian Politics has experienced tremendous changes since independence. Indian National Congress, one of the oldest parties in India (1885) has a very significant role in moulding India's fate.

Indian National Congress Party ruled India from 1947 to 1989, except from 1977 to 1979 when India experienced Unitarian federalism and tilted towards Unitarianism. But from 1989 to 2014 India was ruled only by coalition or Minority governments.

The era of coalition was inaugurated and Indian politics began to work in a real federal structure. Federalizing process tilted towards State as, States have gained upper hand in the policy making through the years. Many state political parties have taken part in the coalition government formation, so the Centre cannot ignore States plea as it is a question of once own survival.

**Key Words: Indian Federalism, Regional Political Parties, Coalition Governments**

**Body of the Text:** Congress party being one of the oldest parties had sufficient support from both rural and urban level, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi during India's struggle for independence. Jawaharlal Nehru, heir of Mahatma Gandhi who became the first Prime Minister of India succeeded in the parliamentary elections and the party enjoyed the power almost for three decades at the Centre and in most of the states.

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Indian politics was dominated by single party for decades and there was no existence of alternate strong national party in this period, pivotal role played by Nehru and his charismatic leadership shaped India's destiny.

In 1989 for the first time coalition government came to power at the Centre, A new era of coalition government, begun when Indian politics was overtaken by regional parties and at the same time multi-party competition led to the dependence of national parties on regional parties. The regional parties centered India's federalism and gained an upper hand in the national decision making, all these developments will be analyzed in detail.

In Indian politics from single party domination to multi-party competition and the beginning of the era of coalition governments within that many factors like state based or regional parties centered in India's federalism.

From 1947 to 1985 India ruled by Indian Congress Party (except 1977-79) continuously, in that only Five Prime Ministers ruled the Country in Thirty Eight years.

According to the political analysts, "Nehru too, is honored because he renounced wealth and case for prison is selfless devolution to the cause of independence" (1) so people of India had great faith in Indian National Congress because under the party India fought for freedom and got independence.

That stage was very significant because the system which was popularly known as Congress system (2) Indian federalism became monolithic in practice. During this period working of federal system in India was similar to Unitarian federal government because selection of state Chief Minister, issuing tickets for legislative assembly elections, and parliamentary elections, making of state ministry, reshuffling the Ministry everything was done by the party high-command. High command culture evolved with Indian National Congress. So there was a very little opportunity for the state leaders to take decisions in the state matter. If any conflict arises, they were settled through party channels rather than constitutional process.

First stage of Indian Federalism started from 1947-1967 there was no much conflict between Centre-state relations, because single party ruled both Centre and almost all the states. Centre-State Relations and the status of states were dependent units on Centre; these tendencies were established during congress rule as a result cordial relations were developed between them.

1967 was the first turning point, because this election changed the course of politics in India. For the first time in State Assembly Elections, Congress failed to get absolute majority and had to face the challenge of non-congress government at the state level.

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The changes occurred in 1967 at the state level called as first change of Indian politics after 20 years of Indian Independence. This stage marked the end of single party domination at the state level. When the Centre increased its Unitarian rule the states became obstinate and begun to elect rival parties to the office.

Major political development occurred in 1977, when for the first time congress party lost its power at the Centre and had to sit in the opposition seat. Thirty years regime of congress collapsed and Prime Minister's post was taken by Non-Congressman Morarji Desai from popularly known Janata party.

After Nehru's death, Ram Manohar Lohia, a veteran socialist and anti-congress planned a strategy to defeat congress which called upon all political parties to unite in order to throw Indian National Congress out of power, that strategy worked and monopoly of the congress ended.

The years 1977-1979 may be considered as second stage of political development in India because opposition parties succeeded to form the government at the Centre. Even though through the years they achieved success and got the power at the state level they had failure to gain power at the national level.

There were many reasons behind those changes to take place at the national level, important among that was the split in Congress, imposition of Internal Emergency, misuse of Article 356, leaders of congress party loyalists who left the party and formed new parties due to ideological differences or personality clashes etc.,

Especially Indira Gandhi's centralizing rule transformed the character of Centre-State Relations in the congress ruled states; she started to remove strong chief ministers, who had powerful base in the states, and appointing persons who were loyal to her.

Whenever ruling party at the Centre misused its power, it had to experience a bitter pill by the states. It happened in 1977, when internal emergency was declared in 1975, (During Indira's rule at the Centre) and misuse of power against opposite party leaders resulted in 1977 election for the first time in India to experience a non-congress party rule at the Centre.

Opposition parties leaving their party differences behind they unitedly came forward to through out of the congress regime they fought the elections under the banner of Janata Party.

But Non-Congress Government could not complete its term when difference aroused within the party resulting in party factionalism.

In 1980 Congress succeeded to regain its position at national level. Indira Gandhi became unquestionable and powerful national leader, 'even more powerful than her father' (3) leader in Indian politics. Her command continued over centralization during congress regime. Party high command culture became so strict that everything was controlled by party high command. After the sudden death of Indira the central power shifted to her son Rajiv Gandhi.

During the period 1947-1985 (Except for 1977-79) congress regime was in power at the Centre. Since freedom movement congress had highly centralized organization The Centre often preferred to utilize the party machinery rather than the governmental process. (4) An increased degree of centralization reflected in the working of Indian federalism from 1947-1985. The reason being single party rule, both at the Centre and State it was further supported by the unitary trends and growth of Central authority. Nehru emphasized that, to preserve the unity and integrity of India the strong element of centralization was inevitable.

Extreme centralization of power emerged in this era, evolution of concentration of power in the office of the Prime Minister and Unitarian trends gained further strength. Centre appeared more powerful than before. State autonomy issue begun from the states.

Inauguration of Janata Party Rule ended dominance of single party reign at the national and state level.

Union-State Relations with its commitment to the process of devolution and decentralization gave rise to expectations that a reversal of centralizing trends was in the offing (5). The issue of demand for state autonomy was raised by some states where regional parties were in power. They wanted the entire constitution to be rewritten, so that "it could be the remedy for the federal imbalance and augment the political, economic and financial autonomy of the states". (6)

A major setback in the issue of state autonomy to the Janata Party was when it recommended to the imposition of President's Rule and dismissal of congress ruled states.

In the general election of 1980 landslide victory of Indira Gandhi once again led to single party domination. When congress returned to power, dissolved all non-congress governments in the state. Union-State Relations strained erosion of federal structure, extreme centralization of power; authoritarian rule was weakened during her regime and damaged the Union-State Relations.

## **Rise of regional parties**

The victory of the Telugu Desam by Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (N.T.Rama Rao) in Andhra Pradesh and the formation of government by Janata Party in Karnataka under Ramakrishna Hegde in early 1983, National Conference in Jammu & Kashmir, Assom Gana Parishad in Assam, Akali Dal in Punjab, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, in Haryana, Lok Dal of Devi Lal, in Kerala UDF, LDF, in Madhya Pradesh, in Mizoram, in Orissa Janata Dal, in Tamil Nadu Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam of M.G. Ramachandran, in Mulayam Singh Yadav, in West Bengal, Left Front, Jyoti Basu. Non-congress parties assumed the power in the states and started strategy to fight against dictatorial rule of Congress introduced new dimension to the politics of Union-State Relations.

The Chief Ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka initiated a fresh debate on federal issue and the Non-Congress Chief Ministers held a series of conclaves in Bangalore, Calcutta, Srinagar and Vijayawada. These meetings demanded for restructuring of Union-State Relations and greater autonomy for the states.

When Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister in 1984, there was a transformed hope of more balanced federal relations. But soon Rajiv Gandhi was held in the political cross-fire and inclined to act like preceding Congress leaders, on federal issues.

From 1985-1989 extreme centralization continued during Rajiv Gandhi's Rule, constitutional conflict between union and state government politics played a major role. Central Government misused constitutional machinery to party rivalry against opposite ruled states.

But since 1989 reversal of the situation occurred in Union-State Relations shifted from Unitarian federation to decentralized federation all these parties seriously challenged Congress in 1989-90 assembly elections with Janata Dal-BJP alliance displacing the Congress from the government in many states like UP, Bihar, Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa etc.

Decline of Congress party at the State Assembly elections in many states and formation of non-congress party government, as the hegemony Congress party broke down and regional parties gained motivation and they demanded for more fiscal and administrative autonomy within the federation.

In the 1980's General Election INC got landslide victory securing 353 seats Indira Gandhi became unquestionable leader at the national level, though she campaigned in

assembly elections to vote for congress and get central aid many of the state opposition parties succeeded in the election and formed the government.

Inauguration of controversy between the union and state governments and misuse of central power against opposite party ruled state, discrimination towards sanctioning grants to the states, misuse of President's Rule etc., created tension in working of federal structure in India.

1983 State Assembly Election put an end to the one-party dominance and brought a situation of multi-party competitions.

The debate on federal structure started when it took the issue, a turning point at the national level. Obstacles began in Centre-State Relations, demanded for greater state autonomy and decentralization of powers to the states, they also demanded for a redefinition of effective feature of Indian Federalism terminating in the appointment of Sarkaria Commission to look into Centre-state relations by Indira Gandhi, on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1983 headed by retired Supreme Court judge R. S. Sarkaria.

The Commission submitted its report in two volumes to the government it recommended that; there is a need to institutionalize the consultation process between the Centre and States. It considered Article 263 as being in harmony with the spirit of co-operative federalism.

The Bangalore Conclave of March 1983 has been a moderate political exercise which was mooted by Ramakrishna Hegde, Chief Minister of Karnataka who demanded a thorough investigation of Centre-State Relations.

Intolerance towards the opposition ruled state governments by the Central Government added more bitter experience like removal of N.T.Rama Rao from the post of Chief Minister in Andhra Pradesh; removal of Jammu & Kashmir Government (1983-1984 and 1984-1986) through imposing President's Rule, Removal of Karnataka Government in 1989 discrimination against opposite party ruled states, led tough war between Centre-State Relationship.

Opposition party leaders expressed their discontent with the Centre, demanded restructure of Centre- State Relations.

“The nation to-day is in the grip of a crisis and the future of our polity is imperilled. The cherished democratic values of our freedom struggle are under assault, and the assertive trend of centralisation of power leading to authoritarianism has resulted in disturbing signs of

alienation in some parts of the country. This dangerous drift has to be halted” (in the meeting of Calcutta Conclave)

The integrity and sovereignty of India must emerge from a conscious effort towards harmonisation of the distinct linguistic, ethnic and cultural entities which constitute our great nation. The golden thread of unity created by the freedom struggle still runs throughout the length and breadth of the country; we must ensure that this thread is strengthened in the times to come.

Although our constitution was meant to be a federal one, its unitary features have increasingly come to overshadow its federal features. Over the years, because of the persistence of one-party rule both at the centre as well as in the states, the powers vested in the states have been greatly eroded.

All this has given rise to many tensions and disputes between the centre and the states. It is important to restore and strengthen the autonomy of the states and to strike a proper balance between the powers of the centre and those of the states, so that the character of our multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural country is preserved.

Seven Non-Congress(I) Chief Ministers Conference held in Calcutta convened by the West Bengal Chief Minister Jyothi Basu denounced the Prime Minister Mr.Rajiv Gandhi’s threat of “dismissal of any state government going in an anti-national direction”.

The Chief Ministers attacked against the Centre attitude and condemned Gandhi’s Statement that The Prime Minister had no right to dub the actions of the state governments which had come to power through popular mandate as anti-national.

“these only showed the growing authoritarian and undemocratic behaviour of the Congress (I) leadership at the centre irresponsible tirades against some Chief Ministers the resolution cautioned the people to take note of the questionable activities being perpetrated to destabilise the elected government through extra-constitutional methods. The meeting decided to launch mass movements in all the 6 states in support of decentralisation of power and more powers to states.

The draft towards centralisation of powers in the hands of the union government was harmful for a healthy growth of states and the federal polity.

## **IMPACT OF 1989 ELECTIONS**

Assembly Elections of 1983 reflected very much on 1989 General election, Fragmentation of votes in congress began from its own mistakes. All opposition parties

leaders like Ramakrishna Hegde, of Karnataka, N.T.Rama Rao, of Andhra Pradesh, Jyoti Basu from West Bengal etc., started protest against central discrimination rule over opposite party ruled states, that When the intolerance began at the Centre against opposition ruled states through the misuse of President's rule all regional parties united. They not only demanded for state autonomy for the states but at the same time they strategized for alternative government at the Centre, as a result 1989 general election was won by them. Major developments took place in Indian politics since power shifted towards states and decentralized federation started as states got upper hands in future governments as influenced on 1989.

In the 1989 Lok Sabha Election for the first time in India number of regional political parties contested in a larger level, ever since the number of contestation has increased, resulted that many changes have been taken place in Indian politics, among that, Rise of Regional Political Parties, Multi-party competition, and the evolution of coalition era. Since then that no single party could muster majority in the future elections,

In the 1989 General election for the first time Congress party was replaced by a minority government called 'National Front Government'. Regional parties or state parties gave a big contest against Congress and for the first time coalition government was formed at the Centre. First coalition government proved that an alternative government can be formed at the Centre. All the elections thereafter resulted in coalition governments.

During Coalition government period relationship process shifted from centralized federalism to co-operative federalism.

In 1996 for the first time Bharatiya Janata Party formed the government. National Front (with BJP) coalition government headed by H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral, formed the government and was in power for 13 months. In 1998 election, in 1999, BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee coalition government became the first coalition government to complete its full term

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee reiterated his commitment to federalism saying that, "Regional parties should have a say in the management of national affairs" (7)

Vajpayee appointed "The National Commission" on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2000 to review the working of constitution (NCRWC). The report submitted in 2002, stated that "The real source of many of our problems is the tendency of centralization of powers and misuse of authority (8)



In 2004 general election, congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power with Man Mohan Singh as Prime Minister and completed its two term.

## **Conclusion**

Since 1989 Indian polity has given greater federalizations with different set of parties ruling at the Centre and at the state level. Regional parties of the state have gained upper hand in the federal polity. It has given them a direct entry and the opportunity for their views to be expressed in the central government.

Working of the Indian Federalism from 1985-2014 was in different stages i.e., from centralized federalism to co-operative federalism.

from 1989 onwards Indian federalism started shifting from Unitarianism to real federation because India experienced Coalition Governments till 2014. We have continuous coalition governments at the Centre from 1989, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2004 to 2008. Central Government could not use its power against state governments in a dictatorial manner this prevented the central government from exploiting the powers given to them because it was the question of one's own survival. It depended on the support of regional or state based parties. So co-operation, co-ordination and adjustment have developed through this experience.

## **Footnotes**

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