BHARATI INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (BIJMRD)

(Open Access Peer-Reviewed International Journal)

DOI Link : https://doi.org/10.70798/Bijmrd/04020004

Available Online: www.bijmrd.com | BIJMRD Volume: 4 | Issue: 02 | February 2026 | e-ISSN: 2584-1890

Coalition Politics in India Since 1989 : A Study of Stability, Compromise and Policy Continuity

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Abstract:

The year 1989 marked a paradigm shift in Indian macro-politics, signalling the transition from the "Congress System" to a prolonged era of multi-party coalition governments. This research paper examines the dual nature of coalition politics in India between 1989 and 2014, evaluating whether this period was defined by chronic instability and policy compromise or by a new form of democratic stability and federal inclusivity. By analysing the tenures of the National Front, United Front, NDA, and UPA, the study highlights how the rise of regional parties and identity-based politics (Mandalization) decentralized power from the Centre to the States.

The findings suggest that while coalition governments often faced "policy paralysis" due to the veto power of diverse partners, they simultaneously ensured a remarkable continuity in core economic reforms and foreign policy. Furthermore, the era significantly strengthened Indian federalism by curbing the misuse of Article 356 and fostering a "negotiated" cooperative framework. Ultimately, the paper argues that coalition politics, far from being a mere compromise, reflected India's socio-cultural pluralism and matured the parliamentary process into a more representative and participatory model.

Keywords: *Coalition Politics, Indian Federalism, Policy Continuity, Regional Parties, Mandalization, Political Stability.*

1. Introduction: Coalition Politics in India and the Post-1989 Transformation

In the history of India's parliamentary democracy, the year 1989 is identified as a watershed moment. From the first general election in 1952, Indian politics had been dominated for nearly four decades by the Indian National Congress. The Ninth General Election of 1989 brought that dominance to an end. Political scientist Rajni Kothari (1964) had described this dominance as the "Congress System." Its collapse confronted Indian politics with a new reality—no single party was able to secure a parliamentary majority on its own. To fill this vacuum, India entered a prolonged phase of "coalition politics."

The rise of coalition politics after 1989 was not an accidental development; rather, it was the outcome of long-term social and political transformations. Political scientist Yogendra Yadav (1996) characterized this shift as the "Second Democratic Upsurge." According to him, during this period Dalits, OBCs (Other Backward Classes), and marginalized groups became politically conscious and began forming their own political parties. After the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations, parties such as

the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Janata Dal rose to prominence in North India, significantly eroding the Congress vote bank (Hasan, 2000).

At the same time, regional parties in South and Northeast India also grew stronger. Parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) emerged as "kingmakers" at the central level. As a result, Indian politics transformed from single-party dominance to a competitive multi-party system.

With the advent of coalition politics, two major debates emerged among political scientists. First, did coalition governments undermine political stability? Second, did the need to satisfy coalition partners force governments into excessive policy compromises?

Between 1989 and 1999, India witnessed seven different governments and several prime ministers. Frequent changes in government created a negative perception of coalition politics among the public. E. Sridharan (2002) argued that these early coalitions were largely "negative coalitions," formed more on the basis of anti-Congress or anti-BJP sentiment than on a shared program. Due to ideological differences, these governments struggled to survive long. However, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1999 and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government led by Manmohan Singh in 2004 changed that perception. These governments demonstrated that with proper coordination and a "Common Minimum Programme," coalition governments could complete a full five-year term successfully (Hasan, 2012).

One of the biggest criticisms of coalition governments is "policy paralysis." Because the government depends on smaller allies, regional or narrow party interests may sometimes take precedence over national interests. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (2010) argued that the increase in the number of "veto players" in coalition governments often delays major economic or foreign policy decisions.

For example, during UPA-I, strong opposition from Left parties nearly derailed the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement. Similarly, pressure from regional parties in West Bengal or Tamil Nadu has influenced India's foreign policy, particularly regarding Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. However, there is another side to the story. Atul Kohli (2006) demonstrated that India's post-1991 economic liberalization was not the achievement of a single party; rather, successive coalition governments continued the reform process. Thus, despite political instability, India's "core policy continuity" remained intact.

Post-1989 coalition politics has also operationalized India's federal structure in practice. The Centre's earlier tendency to dominate the states diminished significantly during the coalition era. Coalition politics played a crucial role in maintaining a balance in Centre–State relations. In other words, coalition politics is not merely a compromise for staying in power; it is a political reflection of India's vast diversity, pluralism, and regional aspirations.

Although single-party majority governments returned after 2014, the relevance of coalitions has not disappeared, as major parties such as the BJP or the Congress still rely on broader alliances like the NDA or the I.N.D.I.A. bloc to govern effectively.

2. Causes Behind the Rise of Coalition Politics: A Multidimensional Analysis:

Although the seeds of coalition politics in India were sown as early as 1967 (through the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal or SVD governments in several states), its decisive and sustained emergence at the national level began in 1989. Four major factors contributed to this transformation: social fragmentation, the rise of regional parties, the weakening of national parties, and ideological polarization.

From 1947 to 1989, Indian politics was characterized by an era of "one-party dominance." Rajni Kothari (1964) described this phase as the "Congress System," a broad umbrella organization that accommodated

diverse ideological strands. However, after the eras of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the Congress gradually lost its internal democratic structure. Political scientist Zoya Hasan (2012) argues that from the time of Rajiv Gandhi onward, the Congress organization began to weaken at the grassroots level, reducing its pan-Indian appeal. In the 1989 election, corruption allegations—particularly the Bofors scandal—along with organizational stagnation pushed Congress away from a single-party majority, thereby opening the path for coalition governments.

In the early 1990s, the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations by the government of V. P. Singh fundamentally altered the trajectory of Indian politics. It marked a historic moment in the political empowerment of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Yogendra Yadav (1996) termed this process the "Second Democratic Upsurge." Leaders such as Mulayam Singh Yadav (SP), Lalu Prasad Yadav (RJD), and Mayawati (BSP) rose to prominence in North India, consolidating Dalit and backward caste vote banks that had previously supported Congress. Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) demonstrated that caste-based politics made it nearly impossible for any single party to maintain exclusive dominance across the vast Hindi-speaking belt. As a result, national parties were compelled to ally with strong regional and caste-based parties.

India's diverse geographical and cultural landscape also encouraged the rise of regional parties, which became a central driver of coalition politics. E. Sridharan (2002) argues that as states began articulating their distinct economic and social concerns, the "one size fits all" approach of national parties became ineffective. In South India, parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) strengthened their demands for greater state autonomy and a larger share in central allocations. These parties realized that in the absence of a single-party majority at the Centre, they could emerge as "kingmakers" and secure greater benefits for their respective states (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2010).

In the late 1980s, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement introduced a new ideological polarization in Indian politics. From winning just two seats in 1984, the BJP became the single largest party in 1996. However, due to its Hindutva ideology, many secular parties initially hesitated to align with it. Simultaneously, there was growing anti-Congress sentiment after decades of its rule. This dual pull of "anti-Congressism" and "anti-BJPism" led smaller parties to unite. The United Front government of 1996 was a prime example, where Left and regional parties formed an alliance to keep both Congress and BJP out of power.

A mathematical factor also contributed to coalition politics: vote fragmentation. Under India's "First Past the Post" (FPTP) electoral system, even small vote shifts can determine seat outcomes. Larger parties recognized that securing an additional 5% or 10% vote share from regional allies could dramatically increase their chances of victory. Patterson (1999) notes that from the 1990s onward, forming pre-poll alliances became almost a "compulsory strategy" for political parties. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) were largely products of such strategic calculations.

The economic liberalization of 1991 further empowered states. Lawrence Saez (2002) argues that a market-oriented economy intensified inter-state competition. Major industrialists began negotiating directly with state chief ministers for investments. This economic autonomy increased the confidence of regional leaders and reduced their dependence on the central leadership in New Delhi. Such "economic federalism" indirectly strengthened the foundations of coalition politics.

Thus, the rise of coalition politics after 1989 was not merely a sign of political instability; it was a natural reflection of India's deep social diversity. The decline of Congress dominance, Mandal-era caste mobilization, regional aspirations, and economic transformation together turned India into a coalition-dependent polity. Although single-party majority governments returned after 2014, they continue to function

within alliance frameworks such as the NDA, demonstrating that coalition politics remains deeply embedded in India's political system.

3. Major Policies and Continuity During the Era of Coalition Governments:

Although the era of coalition politics in India (1989–2014) is often described as a period of "policy paralysis," deeper analysis reveals that this was the very period in which India adopted some of the most transformative policies in its history. According to Granville Austin (1999), India's coalition governments were compelled to follow a "politics of consensus," which ultimately ensured long-term policy continuity.

In 1991, the minority government led by P. V. Narasimha Rao (which functioned with coalition-based external support) introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP), fundamentally altering the direction of the Indian economy. Interestingly, the Left-supported United Front government (1996–97), the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (1999–2004), and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (2004–2014) all maintained the trajectory of liberalization and privatization. Political scientist Atul Kohli (2006) demonstrated that since the 1990s, India's economic policy developed a clear "pro-business" orientation, which remained intact despite disagreements among coalition partners. While some allies publicly criticized reforms, they tacitly acknowledged the necessity of globalization and foreign direct investment (FDI).

During the coalition era, several landmark social welfare policies were adopted to strengthen social protection. The UPA period, in particular, is often described as the golden age of "rights-based" legislation. In 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Right to Information Act (RTI) were enacted. Zoya Hasan (2012) argues that pressure from coalition partners—especially Left parties—played a crucial role in the adoption of such welfare-oriented policies. Major initiatives of the NDA period, such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, were also continued with importance during the UPA era. Thus, coalition-era policies transcended party manifestos and evolved into national programs.

In foreign policy, coalition governments steered India away from idealism toward pragmatism. In 1998, the NDA government conducted nuclear tests at Pokhran. Although this led to international sanctions, the subsequent UPA government skilfully concluded the Indo–US Civil Nuclear Agreement (2008) with the United States. According to Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (2010), this agreement marked a milestone in India's foreign policy, achieved despite intense internal opposition and the withdrawal of support by Left parties. From the Gujral Doctrine to Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Lahore Bus diplomacy and Manmohan Singh's peace initiatives, there was a consistent effort to maintain stable relations with neighbouring countries.

One of the most significant contributions of coalition governments was the strengthening of Indian federalism. Lawrence Saez (2002) argues that as regional parties gained importance during this era, disparities in central budget allocations and grants to states began to decline. Regional parties such as the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) were able to secure major projects and investments for their respective states. As a result, development became less Delhi-centric and more regionally distributed.

However, not all reforms progressed smoothly. Due to coalition constraints, several major reforms stalled. Although the Vajpayee government created a Ministry of Disinvestment, privatization of many public sector enterprises was halted during the UPA period due to objections from coalition partners. The issue of FDI in retail faced prolonged resistance from the All India Trinamool Congress, which even threatened the government's stability (Hasan, 2012). No coalition government dared to undertake comprehensive labour law reforms, fearing backlash from trade unions and Left allies.

In sum, post-1989 coalition governments ensured what may be called "evolutionary continuity" in India's policymaking. While single-party governments may risk unilateral decisions, coalition governments refine policies through negotiation and compromise, often adopting a middle path. Although decision-making was sometimes slower, the resulting policies tended to enjoy broader social and regional acceptance.

4. Stability versus Compromise: An Analysis

After the defeat of the Congress led by Rajiv Gandhi in 1989, when India entered the coalition era, many political scientists feared that the country might descend into prolonged political instability. Over time, however, the character of coalition governments evolved, and the very definition of "stability" changed. The stability of coalition governments can be divided into two phases:

(a) The First Decade of Instability (1989–1999)

During this decade, India witnessed unprecedented political turbulence. The 1989 National Front government and the 1996 United Front government were both short-lived. According to E. Sridharan (2002), these coalitions were largely "opportunistic coalitions." Since the parties lacked a common program and were united mainly by the objective of keeping Congress out of power, internal conflicts quickly led to their collapse.

For example, in 1990 the withdrawal of support by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led to the fall of the V. P. Singh government. Similarly, in 1997–98, the withdrawal of Congress support forced the governments of H. D. Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujral to step down.

(b) The Era of Structural Stability (1999–2014)

The formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 1999 under Atal Bihari Vajpayee marked a new milestone in India's coalition politics. It was the first coalition government to complete a full five-year term. Over the next decade, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government also maintained stability.

Zoya Hasan (2012) argues that this stability resulted primarily from two factors:

1. The presence of a strong national party (BJP or Congress) at the head of the coalition.
2. The adoption of a written Common Minimum Programme in advance to manage disputes among coalition partners.

Compromise in Coalition Governance:

Coalition government inherently involves "give and take." Since no single party holds absolute power, compromise in policymaking becomes unavoidable. To ensure stability, considerations such as "regional balance" or "ally satisfaction" often take precedence over merit. Such arrangements are sometimes described as "office-seeking coalitions."

For instance, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, key ministries such as Railways or Coal were often allocated to powerful regional allies—such as the All India Trinamool Congress, Rashtriya Janata Dal, or Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam—to prevent them from withdrawing support (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2010).

Atul Kohli (2006) shows that difficult but necessary economic decisions were sometimes stalled due to objections from coalition partners. During the UPA period (2004–2014), opposition from Left parties delayed reforms such as pension restructuring and FDI in insurance for years. Critics labelled this phenomenon "policy paralysis." In such cases, the price of maintaining governmental stability was a slowdown in reform momentum.

The Positive Side of Compromise:

Coalition instability or compromise should not be viewed solely in negative terms. Many scholars argue that coalition governments brought a form of "social stability" to India. Through coalition arrangements, representatives from South India, Northeast India, and marginalized groups within the Hindi belt gained access to the corridors of power in New Delhi. In a country as diverse as India, this helped reduce separatist tendencies and strengthened national integration.

Lawrence Saez (2002) contends that coalition politics reduced the Centre's authoritarian tendencies and granted greater autonomy to the states. In earlier decades, the central government frequently misused Article 356 of the Constitution to dismiss state governments. During the coalition era, however, the Centre hesitated to take such steps against states governed by its own allies. This contributed to long-term stability within India's federal framework.

Compromise does not necessarily imply weakness; often, it helps prevent extremism. When a single party governs with a majority, there is a risk of imposing ideologically rigid decisions. In coalition governments, however, policies are shaped through negotiation among diverse viewpoints, resulting in more moderate and carefully considered outcomes. For example, during the Vajpayee government, several controversial agenda items of the BJP—such as the abrogation of Article 370 or the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code—were kept in abeyance because secular allies like the Janata Dal (United) (JDU) and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) did not support them. This contributed to maintaining communal harmony and political balance.

An analysis of post-1989 coalition politics shows that "stability" and "compromise" are complementary rather than contradictory. After an initial phase of instability, India mastered the art of coalition governance. Although reform speed was sometimes sacrificed, the country gained a more participatory and representative democracy in return.

Even though single-party majority governments re-emerged after 2014 and 2019, the wave of regional aspirations that began during the coalition era remains deeply embedded in Indian politics and cannot be ignored.

5. Impact on Policy Continuity:

Between 1989 and 2014—a span of nearly twenty-five years—India witnessed coalition governments of the Left, Right, and Centre. Despite this wide ideological diversity, a remarkable underlying continuity can be observed in India's core policy framework. Political scientist Atul Kohli (2006) described this phenomenon as "stable reforms."

The most significant transformation in India's economic history began in 1991 under a minority/coalition-supported government led by P. V. Narasimha Rao. The reforms initiated by Rao were carried forward by the United Front government (1996–98), which was supported by Left parties. Even when the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in 1999, many expected a return to a protectionist "swadeshi" economic model. Instead, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government accelerated disinvestment and deepened economic reforms (Sridharan, 2002). When the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) assumed office in 2004, it retained many of the NDA's economic policies. Thus, while coalition pressures sometimes slowed the pace of reform, the overall direction of policy remained unchanged.

In foreign policy as well, coalition governments demonstrated striking continuity. Despite the instability often associated with coalition politics, India maintained its principle of "strategic autonomy." After the 1998 nuclear tests, and despite international pressure, the subsequent UPA government successfully concluded the Indo–US Civil Nuclear Agreement with the United States, thereby securing global recognition of India's strategic status (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2010). Policies such as peace talks with Pakistan and

expanding border trade with China were transmitted from one government to another. This continuity was possible because India's foreign policy has largely been shaped by professional bureaucracy and national security institutions, which operate above day-to-day coalition politics.

Coalition governments had a particularly significant impact on India's welfare policies. During the UPA era, landmark initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA/MGNREGA) and the National Food Security Act were largely the result of pressure from coalition partners and civil society (Hasan, 2012). Even after the return of single-party majority governments, these welfare schemes could not be dismantled, as they had by then become embedded in India's social framework.

Of course, coalition politics also had negative effects. At times, crucial reform proposals remained stalled for years due to the veto power of coalition partners—a phenomenon widely described as "policy paralysis." Regional interests occasionally overshadowed national priorities. For example, domestic political constraints from coalition allies compelled the central government to step back from concluding the Teesta water-sharing agreement with Bangladesh.

In sum, the coalition governments of post-1989 India demonstrated that political instability does not necessarily imply policy vacuum. On the contrary, coalition compulsions often made policies more inclusive and moderate. Although major structural reforms were sometimes delayed, India's fundamental trajectory of development and national security was not derailed within the maze of coalition politics.

5. Evaluation: Strengthening of Federalism

Although Article 1 of the Constitution describes India as a "Union of States," for several decades after independence the country's governance displayed a strong unitary bias. However, coalition politics after 1989 fundamentally altered this structural balance. According to Lawrence Saez (2002), coalition governments pushed India toward what he calls "federalism without a Centre," in which regional parties gained a central role in national policymaking.

After 1989, national parties such as the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party became dependent on regional parties to form governments at the Centre. As a result, regional aspirations were no longer confined within state boundaries; they became part of the national agenda. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (2010) argue that coalition politics transformed Indian federalism into a form of "negotiated federalism." Parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) from Tamil Nadu, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) from Andhra Pradesh, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) from Bihar secured key ministerial portfolios at the Centre and leveraged them to obtain special packages, railway projects, and industrial investments for their states. This contributed to the decentralization of development.

One of the most controversial aspects of Indian federalism had been the use of Article 356 of the Constitution to dismiss elected state governments. During the era of Congress dominance, the Centre frequently dismissed opposition-ruled state governments. However, in the coalition era this tendency declined dramatically. E. Sridharan (2002) argues that prime ministers heading coalition governments exercised caution, as dismissing a state government could anger coalition partners and lead them to withdraw support. The 1994 judgment in the S. R. Bommai v. Union of India case, combined with coalition compulsions, provided significant protection to state governments against arbitrary central intervention.

Economic reforms initiated in 1991 ran parallel to the rise of coalition politics. In a market-oriented economy, states began competing with one another to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). Atul Kohli (2006) argues that the relatively weaker central control under coalition governments enabled chief ministers to emerge as "regional economic managers." Whereas earlier major projects required approval from New

Delhi, during the coalition era states enjoyed greater autonomy. This economic self-reliance increased political confidence at the state level, thereby strengthening the federal structure.

An intriguing dimension of coalition politics was the growing involvement of states in national foreign policy. In a geographically vast country like India, relations with neighbouring states often intersect with the interests of particular Indian states. For instance, opposition from the West Bengal government affected the Teesta water-sharing agreement with Bangladesh, and parties from Tamil Nadu influenced India's Sri Lanka policy (Hasan, 2012). Although critics sometimes viewed such interventions as contrary to national interest, they reflected a deeper reality: India was no longer governed solely from New Delhi—regional voices increasingly resonated even in international affairs.

Of course, the strengthening of federalism also had negative aspects. At times, coalition partners used their leverage to press for narrow interests, a phenomenon critics describe as "bargaining federalism." Nevertheless, overall coalition politics gave India's multi-party democracy a more inclusive character. Zoya Hasan (2012) suggests that coalition governments moved India toward a form of "multilevel federalism," where power is distributed not only between Centre and states but also among diverse social and regional groups.

In conclusion, post-1989 coalition politics transformed Indian federalism from a constitutional principle into a lived political reality. It curtailed central dominance and elevated states to the status of equal stakeholders. Although India returned to single-party majority governments after 2014, the twenty-five years of coalition politics left a deep and lasting imprint on the country's federal structure. The contemporary emphasis on "cooperative federalism" is, in many ways, rooted in the coalition era.

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Citation: **Mondal. S.,** (2026) "Coalition Politics in India Since 1989 : A Study of Stability, Compromise and Policy Continuity", *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-4, Issue-02, February-2026.