Coalitions and Consequences: Learnership and Leadership in India, 1948–2008

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This essay attempts to explore a missing aspect of the large literature that has grown up around coalition governments in India and then to include that aspect in a discussion of the consequences of coalition governments. Are they good or bad for economic development, social change and honest, effective government? Do they work better at the state level rather than the national?

The missing aspect is the ‘educational process’ by which Indian politicians have learned the benefits and requirements of coalition governments and then how to make them work. I argue that such a process began in the state of Kerala, took nearly a generation to ‘learn’ and partly depended on the availability (and talents) of individual leaders. The same educational process that fostered understanding of the rewards that coalitions can bring also sensitised politicians to the need to deliver goods to their constituents. This need to satisfy voters leads to consideration of questions about the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of coalitions.

In arguing that the educational process has been overlooked in study of coalitions in India, I am not discounting other aspects. I would particularly acknowledge the fragmentation of Indian politics as sub-regions and previously marginal and illiterate groups have produced people who understand the political system and are able to work effectively within it. Potent local political parties emerge and it becomes difficult to create a powerful state-wide party, much less a powerful national party.

2.1 Coalitions in Kerala: Learnership and Leadership

Although the state of Kerala accounts for less than three per cent of India’s population (about 32 million out of 1100 million), it has acquired notoriety for its ‘model’ of economic development and for its election of a Communist government in 1957. Kerala also ‘learned’ coalitions before the rest of India.

Kerala had to. The composition of the state and its social structure were in some ways a microcosm of India. To begin with, Kerala state of the Indian Union was created only in 1956 by the joining of two old princely states (Travancore, the large southern half, and pint-sized Cochin in the middle) and the British-ruled district of Malabar in the north. In each of the old units, sentiments and interests made people conscious of ‘their’ particular place, however much the Malayalam language and an overarching Malayali culture may have made a united Kerala seem a good idea.
Kerala was also socially segmented, highly literate and widely mobilized, even at independence. The population was roughly 20 per cent Muslim, 20 per cent Christian, 20 per cent high-caste Hindu and 40 per cent lower-caste Hindu. But Muslims were concentrated in Malabar district; Christians of various sects in Cochin and central and north Travancore. Churches, education societies and social organizations tended to work most effectively within the administrative unit where they originated.

The most notable exception to the latter statement was the Communist Party of India (CPI). Often banned from the 1930s to the 1950s, the CPI used different jurisdictions to enable members to slip between the butter-fingers of different police forces and continue their agitations. Sympathizers of the Indian National Congress (INC) were present in all three units, but they had few of the links or reasons for cooperation that the Communists had.

The three-dimensional patchwork of Kerala — jurisdictions, social groups and political and social organizations — looked in some ways like India in miniature. But high levels of literacy and social upheaval (the result, in part, of the collapse of the matrilineal family system that affected a large proportion of Hindus) accelerated participation in politics. First, the national movement against princely rule (or the British) drew people into action and organisation. After 1947, the struggle between Communists and the Congress brought political activity to every village.

Travancore held the first universal-suffrage elections in India in February 1948. The Travancore State Congress, loosely affiliated to the Indian National Congress, was inundated with members prior to the elections and scored a huge victory, taking 56 seats without a contest and winning 41 out of 61 contested seats with 48 per cent of the vote. It formed a government under the man who led the anti-princely movement; but the government collapsed in six months. Over the next 22 years, residents of the Travancore area experienced a dozen governments and three periods of President’s Rule from New Delhi. No government served a full term. Between 1970 and 2007, however, Kerala governments have completed their full five-year terms on six occasions.

Why did Kerala produce such unstable government in the earlier when in the rest of India, the period from 1947–67 was controlled by the Congress Party, and political scientists characterised this as an era of a ‘dominant-party system’? First, almost nowhere else in India had a political challenge to the Congress comparable to that of the Communist Party. This competitive struggle mobilised groups for politics. People were exhorted to identify with ‘their party’ — or their religion or their caste. Because literacy was high (40 per cent of the total population in 1951) and newspapers readily available, such exhortations went wide and deep in ways that other areas of India did not replicate until a generation later.

Thus the ingredients existed for locally based political organisations, calling themselves ‘parties’ and claiming state-wide reach though having a genuine base only in a small area. Such ‘parties’ split off from both left and right of politics. They gave themselves names like ‘the Kerala Congress’ and often added bracketed initials or names to identify the leader who was running the group — for example, Kerala Congress (Mani).

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2 Travancore and Cochin were merged to form Travancore-Cochin in 1949. They in turn merged with Malabar District in 1956 to form Kerala. Tamil-speaking districts in the south were joined with Madras state (now Tamil Nadu).