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**POLITICS AND POLICIES OF INDIA'S COALITION GOVERNMENTS
AT THE CENTRAL LEVEL: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF NATIONAL-
REGIONAL PARTY RELATIONS (2004-2024)**

Pramod Kumar Bhukar* ; Prof. (Dr) Rajbir Singh Dalal**

“Research Scholar,
Department of Political Science,
Central University of Haryana,
Mahendragarh, Haryana, INDIA
Email Id: pramodchoudhary34@gmail.com

**Professor,
Chairperson,
Department of Political Science,
CDLU, Sirsa, Haryana, INDIA
Email Id: rajbirsinghdalal@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of India's parliamentary system from single-party dominance to a multi-party coalition framework marks a profound shift in post-colonial democratic governance. This paper critically examines the policies and determinants of coalition governments at the central level from 2004 to 2024. Employing a historical institutionalist approach and empirical electoral analysis, it delineates three phases: the decentralized, consensus-driven UPA, 2004-2014; the centralized, majoritarian NDA, 2014-2024; and the resurgence of coalition dependence after the 2024 elections. Focusing on national-regional party relations, the study analyses how coalition compulsions shaped public policy, fiscal federalism, and institutional autonomy. It compares the UPA's rights-based welfare model with the NDA's developmental and majoritarian agenda, including GST, Article 370 abrogation, and Farm Laws. Drawing on Riker's Coalition Theory and Yadav's democratic upsurge framework, the paper argues that regional parties serve as vital veto players and structural shock-absorbers in India's asymmetrical federation. It concludes that coalition bargaining remains essential for managing India's socio-cultural diversity.

KEYWORDS: Congress System, Coalition Politics, Democratic Upsurge, Policy & Security, Paradox of Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of India's democratic framework represents a continuous structural dialogue between centralized state authority and regional pluralism. From the inaugural general elections in 1952 until the late 1980s, the Indian political landscape was heavily characterized by the "Congress System", single-party dominance where national priorities absorbed, co-opted, or subordinated regional aspirations. However, the socio-political awakening of subaltern groups, structural economic shifts, and the mobilization of vernacular elites fundamentally altered this monolithic arrangement. By 1989, a highly fragmented multi-party system emerged, rendering single-party majorities elusive and elevating regional political formations into indispensable national kingmakers.

This paper undertakes a critical political science inquiry into the twenty-year epoch spanning 2004 to 2024. This period is historically unique, encapsulating the maturation of center-left pluralistic coalitions (UPA), the eclipse of regional bargaining power by right-of-center majoritarianism (NDA), and the subsequent resurgence of multi-polar coalition dependency in 2024. By tracking the metamorphosis of national-regional party relations, this paper explores the empirical and theoretical determinants that dictate policy formulation, economic reform, and federal governance in the world's largest democracy.

Research Objectives

Followings are the main objectives of this paper:

- To analysis National Regional parties relations in coalition governments of UPA (2004–2014) and NDA (2014–2024).
- To critically analyse the policy determinantors, outputs and governance architectures of the coalition Governments from 2004 to 2024.
- To assess the consequences of coalition dynamics on federalism, parliamentary accountability, and institutional autonomy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design anchored in historical institutionalism and comparative policy analysis. The qualitative dimension relies on critical discourse analysis of coalition politics and policies. Quantitative substantiation is derived from secondary data, including ECI reports, NITI Aayog socio-economic indices, CSDS-Lokniti, research articles and related books.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To rigorously analyze coalition politics in India, this paper synthesizes several core political science theories: Riker postulated that rational actors form "minimum winning coalitions"(MWC) or "Size Principle" to avoid diluting power and payoffs. However, the Indian

experience frequently defies this, favouring surplus oversized coalitions to build sub-national legitimacy and manage federal diversity (**Riker, 1962**). Gamson argued that cabinet portfolios are distributed in strict proportion to the legislative seats contributed by coalition partners. This law operated visibly during the UPA era but was systematically subverted during the NDA's dominant phase (**Gamson, 1961**). The aggregation or regionalization of party systems is inextricably linked to fiscal federalism. As states gain economic autonomy, regional parties strengthen, forcing national parties into coalitions (**Chhibber & Kollman, 2004**). Based on Dalal's (2012) structural analysis, in a quasi-federal state, managing internal security and maintaining federal harmony are inherently linked. Dominant national parties attempt to centralize security, while regional coalition partners demand decentralized law-and-order autonomy, creating an ongoing federal bargaining process. We can indicate this in a word Federal-Security Nexus Theory (**Dalal, 2012**). The post-2014 NDA regime operates as a de facto ethnic democracy, where majoritarian nationalism subordinates minority rights and attempts to homogenize regional diversity (**Jaffrelot, 2021**). The mobilization of subaltern classes. The "Second Upsurge" (1990s) empowered OBCs and regional parties, while the "Third Upsurge" created a highly aspirational, welfare-driven electorate (**Yadav, 2020**). Palshikar, explains how the BJP established a "Second Dominant Party System" post-2014, utilizing cultural nationalism and centralized welfare to marginalize regional allies despite formally existing within the NDA (**Palshikar, 2019**).

Evolution of Coalition Politics in India

India's party system evolution is vast and deeply contested. The Congress System provided the baseline for understanding consensus-building within a single dominant party (Kothari, 1964). The genesis of coalition politics at the center traces back to the decline of the Congress monolith. The imposition of the Emergency catalyzed the first major national coalition, the Janata Party, though its internal contradictions led to a swift collapse. The true era of coalition politics commenced in 1989 with the National Front government, driven by the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, which irreversibly shifted political power toward OBCs. The 1990s witnessed profound instability. As this system decayed the resulting crisis of governability and the rise of fragmented regional elites (Kohli, 1991). With short-lived United Front governments relying on external support. However, by the late 1990s, the system stabilized into bipolar pre-poll alliances: the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led UPA. This evolution demonstrated a maturation of the political class, where regional parties realized that national power required alignment with a national anchor party, and national parties recognized the impossibility of securing a majority without regional multipliers. The mechanics of coalition politics, the fragmentation of the party system is a structural response to India's diversity rather than a temporary anomaly (Sridharan, 2024).

India's subcontinental socio-cultural diversity, coalition governance is not a "myth" or a temporary deviation, but the organic, permanent reality of the Indian state. The success of Indian

democracy lies in its paradoxical ability to extract national stability out of regional fragmentation. Coalition governments compel national parties to abandon rigid ideological orthodoxies in favour of pragmatic, localized compromises (Dalal, 2012).

Electoral Trends and Coalition Patterns (2004–2024)

An analysis of ECI data reveals a distinct cyclicity in electoral trends. In 2004, the INC secured 145 seats, and the BJP 138. Regional parties held the balance of power, forcing the INC to draft a CMP. By 2009, the INC improved to 206 seats, but regional fragmentation remained high, necessitating continued coalition dependence. The 2014 elections marked a seismic shift; the BJP secured an absolute majority of 282 seats, rendering its NDA allies arithmetically redundant, though politically useful for federal optics. In 2019, the BJP's tally rose to 303 seats. CSDS-Lokniti data indicates this was driven by a massive consolidation of Hindu votes across caste lines, overriding regional loyalties. Palshikar conceptualizes the BJP's hegemony as a "Second Dominant Party System," distinct from the Congress era due to its reliance on ideological consolidation rather than pluralistic consensus (Palshikar, 2019). However, the 2024 elections saw the BJP's seat share decline to 240, falling 32 seats short of a majority. The INC improved to 99 seats, and the INDIA bloc demonstrated robust regional consolidation, forcing the BJP into genuine coalition bargaining with the TDP and JD(U).

Role of Regional Parties in Coalition Formation

Regional parties act as the bedrock of India's coalition architecture. Their role is multifold. First, they act as institutional veto players. Parties like the Trinamool Congress (TMC), DMK, and JD(U) have repeatedly blocked central legislation that threatened their state interests. Second, they serve as ideological moderators. Regional parties often compel national parties to temper their ideological extremes; the secular, sub-regional imperatives of the TDP and JD(U) have historically restrained the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda during coalition governance. Third, they function as resource extractors, utilizing their leverage to extract federal resources, demanding Special Category Status, customized developmental packages, and specific infrastructural investments for their home states.

UPA Governments (2004–2014): Politics and Policies

The UPA era represented a deeply institutionalized, center-left coalition anchored by the Common Minimum Programme (CMP), a negotiated document that reconciled the market-liberalization tendencies of the Manmohan Singh government with the welfarist demands of the Left Front and regional allies. Advised by the National Advisory Council (NAC), the UPA enacted a paradigm shift toward rights-based statutory guarantees, including MGNREGA (2005) for rural employment, the RTI Act (2005) for democratic transparency, the RTE Act (2009) for elementary education, and the National Food Security Act (2013).

In terms of social justice and minorities, the UPA implemented 27% OBC reservations in central educational institutions and commissioned the Sachar Committee to address the socio-economic marginalization of Muslims. However, during UPA-II, the coalition descended into what commentators termed policy paralysis. The application of Gamson's Law meant that regional allies controlled lucrative ministries as autonomous fiefdoms. This structural fragmentation culminated in massive corruption scandals, notably the 2G Spectrum Scam, the Coalgate Scam, and the CWG Scam. The inability of the PMO to discipline coalition partners severely damaged the executive's credibility, stalling economic liberalization and foreign direct investment. Additionally, the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal triggered the Left Front's withdrawal of support, highlighting how regional and ideological allies can exert a direct veto over sovereign foreign policy.

NDA Governments (2014–2024): Politics and Policies

The NDA era fundamentally altered the coalition paradigm, operating as a dominant-party coalition. Possessing an absolute majority, the BJP centralized executive power within the PMO, marginalizing allies. The NDA executed severe economic interventions, including Demonetization (2016), which abruptly withdrew 86% of currency without consulting regional allies, and the GST (2017), which unified the national market but severely curtailed the fiscal autonomy of states.

The NDA shifted from rights-based welfare to the targeted delivery of private goods, utilizing the JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile) for Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT). Programs like Ujjwala Yojana, Swachh Bharat Mission, and Jal Jeevan Mission bypassed state-level intermediaries. The NDA aggressively pursued capital-intensive infrastructure, symbolized by the Vande Bharat trains, highway expansion, and railway modernization. The BJP also executed long-standing ideological commitments, most notably the abrogation of Article 370, Tripal Talaq, and Construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya after the SC decision in Ram Janmabhoomi Case. Implementation of the NEP 2020 was also parties Policy strength.

However, the passage of three agricultural deregulation laws in 2020 without parliamentary scrutiny triggered massive agrarian protests, forcing the NDA to repeal the Farm Laws in 2021, a major backstep illustrating that mass mobilization could substitute for the absence of institutional coalition vetoes. The response was a massive, highly organized year-long mobilization of farmers, primarily from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh. The farm laws crisis created deep structural friction within the ruling alliance, forcing the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), one of the oldest founding members of the NDA and Hanuman Beniwal's RLP from Rajasthan to formally exit the coalition (Shyam, Singla & Singh, 2024).

Comparative Analysis of UPA and NDA Regimes

A descriptive comparative analysis reveals stark differences. The UPA operated as a decentralized, minority-led, consensus-driven coalition, while the NDA functioned as a

centralized, majority-led, dominant-party apparatus. The UPA's welfare paradigm relied on rights-based statutory entitlements, whereas the NDA favored asset-based Direct Benefit Transfers. Executive power under the UPA was diffused, with the PMO constrained by regional allies, leading to portfolio-driven corruption scandals. Conversely, the NDA concentrated power in the PMO, leading to centralized federal friction and controversies surrounding institutional capture, such as the Electoral Bonds scheme. Foreign policy under the UPA was cautious and vulnerable to coalition vetoes, whereas the NDA adopted a muscular approach, weaponizing foreign policy for domestic political capital. Internal security presents the most severe challenge to coalition federalism. When the central government attempts to implement sweeping national security measures (such as the deployment of central paramilitary forces, counter-terrorism central agencies, or the abrogation of Article 370), it directly encroaches upon the constitutional domain of the states (Police and Public Order). During the UPA era, regional allies successfully vetoed the creation of the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) to protect state autonomy. In contrast, the NDA's dominant-party coalition bypassed regional consensus to execute centralized security mandates. Without a consultative coalition framework, unilateral internal security policies exacerbate center-state alienation and fuel regional insurgencies. (Dalal, 2012)

Coalition Politics, Parliamentary Democracy and Federalism: Centre–State Relations

Data from PRS Legislative Research illustrates a stark contrast in parliamentary functioning. Under the UPA, coalition compulsions necessitated rigorous debate; a majority of bills were referred to parliamentary standing committees for multi-partisan review. Under the NDA, this practice diminished significantly. The absolute majority allowed the NDA to pass sweeping legislation via voice votes amidst protests. Centralization on parliamentary democracy, noting how domination without inclusion marginalized regional allies within the NDA (Yadav & Kirk, 2023). The return of coalition dependency post-2024 is expected to restore deliberative democracy, forcing the executive to accommodate parliamentary scrutiny.

Coalition governments inherently strengthen the federal fabric. During the UPA era, the reliance on regional parties ensured that state-specific concerns were elevated to the national agenda, promoting cooperative bargaining. However, the NDA era witnessed a shift toward centralized federalism. The establishment of the GST Council forced states to surrender taxation powers. Furthermore, the NDA government systematically weaponized federal investigative agencies specifically the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and CBI targeting regional opposition leaders to destabilize state governments. This coercive approach severely strained center-state relations, transforming federalism from a cooperative enterprise into a coercive battleground.

Centre-state relations experienced deep friction under the NDA. Beyond the GST and the use of the ED/CBI, the NDA's management of the COVID-19 pandemic initially featured unilateral central lockdowns, later shifting the burden of healthcare management and vaccine procurement onto the states. Furthermore, the role of centrally-appointed Governors in opposition-ruled states acting as partisan agents severely eroded the cooperative federal framework.

The 2014–2024 trajectory of Indian coalition politics demonstrates that excessive centralization under dominant-party governance can generate significant federal tensions, agrarian resistance, and socio-economic discontent despite administrative efficiency. Policies such as demonetization, the Farm Laws, and unresolved unemployment exposed the structural limitations of centralized decision-making without broad political consultation (RBI, 2018), (Shyam & Singh, 2024). Ultimately, the 2024 electoral verdict reaffirmed that coalition bargaining, regional accommodation, and federal consensus remain indispensable to the stability and democratic legitimacy of the Indian parliamentary system. Agniveer (Agnipath) scheme, defended by technocrats as a necessary measure to reduce the mounting defense pension budget and lower the average age profile of the armed forces, the scheme triggered widespread youth protests across Bihar, Rajasthan, and Haryana. Agniveer scheme into a major point of political contention (Kumar & Verma, 2024).

Coalition Politics, Welfare Governance and Economic Reforms

The transition from UPA to NDA marked a shift from welfare politics to welfare nationalism. The UPA's MGNREGA and NFSA were institutional, rights-based approaches. The NDA's approach utilized digital governance to deliver housing, toilets, and gas cylinders directly. This New Welfarism stripped regional parties of their traditional patronage roles, allowing the BJP to claim sole credit for welfare delivery, thereby consolidating a vast, cross-caste beneficiary vote bank.

Coalitions are often maligned for slowing economic reforms, a critique validated by the UPA's policy paralysis in its second term. However, coalition theory suggests that policies enacted through consensus are more durable. The UPA's economic liberalization was cautious but sustained high GDP growth besides introducing several citizens centric and social welfare programmes. The NDA, unburdened by veto players, executed shock therapies like Demonetization and GST. While these demonstrated executive decisiveness, the lack of consultative feedback loops resulted in severe structural shocks to the informal economy and MSME sectors. Focusing on the centralization of campaign finance is the political economy of this dominance and criminalization or weaponization of politics (Vaishnav, 2017).

Coalition Politics and Foreign Policy

Coalition governments face unique constraints in foreign policy. The UPA struggled with the Indo-US nuclear deal due to Leftist opposition and failed to sign the Teesta water-sharing agreement with Bangladesh due to the TMC's veto. Conversely, the NDA exercised total freedom. The Surgical Strike 2016, Balakot airstrikes 2019, were seamlessly integrated into the 2019 domestic campaign (Jaffrelot, 2021). According to official MEA reports and statements, these actions established a "new normal" in India's regional deterrence strategy, demonstrating a willingness to accept escalation risks to protect national security. India's engagement with the

Quad and its nuanced stance on China and Pakistan were executed without the friction of regional interference, projecting a muscular global image.

Coalition Politics viz a viz Assertion Politics

Both regimes utilized social justice frameworks for political consolidation. The UPA relied heavily on the Sachar Committee and OBC reservations. The NDA innovated by introducing the 10% Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) quota, appeasing upper castes while heavily wooing non-dominant OBCs and Dalits. The tension over social justice culminated in the Caste Census debates, where regional parties championed the census to resurrect Mandal politics and fracture the BJP's overarching Hindu nationalist coalition. Christophe Jaffrelot critically interprets this phase through the lens of Ethnic Democracy, warning against the erosion of institutional checks (Jaffrelot, 2021).

The BJP's success from 2014-2024 relied on subverting the traditional caste calculations of regional parties. By mobilizing non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs, the BJP's social coalition bypassed the dominant castes that historically controlled regional outfits. However, the 2024 elections revealed the limitations of this strategy; the Samajwadi Party's PDA formula successfully re-consolidated backward castes in Uttar Pradesh, forcing a return to fractured, caste-driven coalition arithmetic. Regional parties like the JD(U) and RJD do not merely survive on broad regional identity, but on hyper-specific caste arithmetic (the mobilization of Extremely Backward Classes [EBCs] and Mahadalits). National parties (both INC and BJP) are fundamentally incapable of penetrating these complex, localized social strata on their own. Therefore, forming coalitions with regional caste-based parties is a structural necessity for capturing power at the Center. The demand for the Nationwide Caste Census in 2023–2024 by these regional actors was a calculated move to force the national coalition to address granular social justice, proving Dalal's thesis that sub-national caste dynamics continuously dictate national coalition agendas. (Dalal, 2023)

The 2004–2024 timeline validates Yogendra Yadav's theory of Democratic Upsurges. The UPA era represented the institutionalization of the Second Upsurge, where regional and lower-caste parties dictated national terms. The NDA era represented a counter-mobilization, a Third Upsurge driven by Hindutva, welfare nationalism, and a desire for strong, centralized leadership. The 2024 verdict represents a synthesis: a highly aspirational electorate that desires national stability but refuses to surrender regional and caste-based political autonomy.

Women emerged as a pivotal voting bloc across both eras. The UPA initiated gender budgeting, while the NDA aggressively targeted women through Ujjwala Yojana and sanitation drives. A historic milestone was the enactment of Women's Reservation Act (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023), reserving 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State's Legislative Assemblies. However, its implementation is deferred pending a delimitation exercise, reflecting the political

caution of the dominant party in balancing gender equity with male-dominated regional and caste power structures.

Coalition Politics after Lok Sabha Election, 2024

The general election, 2024 unequivocally resurrected the coalition era. With the BJP reduced to 240 seats, the leverage of the TDP and JD(U) has fundamentally altered the executive's trajectory. Early indicators show a return to coalition compulsions: the central government has been forced to offer significant financial packages to Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, defer contentious ideological legislation, and refer the Waqf Amendment Bill to a parliamentary committee. This marks a definitive shift back to consensus governance and spatial coalition bargaining.

CONCLUSION

The period from 2004 to 2024 represents a transformative phase in the evolution of Indian parliamentary democracy and coalition governance. The study demonstrates that coalition politics is not a temporary deviation but a structural necessity within India's socially, linguistically, and regionally diverse federal polity. The UPA era institutionalized rights-based welfare and consensus-oriented governance, though it remained vulnerable to administrative fragmentation, coalition compulsions, and corruption scandals. In contrast, the NDA era enabled centralized decision-making, rapid infrastructure expansion, and macroeconomic reforms; however, excessive executive centralization, majoritarian politics, and policies such as demonetization and the Farm Laws generated significant federal tensions, parliamentary marginalization, and agrarian discontent.

The analysis further establishes that regional parties continue to function as indispensable veto players in safeguarding federal balance, representational diversity, and institutional accountability. The 2024 general election marked the re-emergence of coalition dependency, reaffirming the enduring relevance of consensus-building and cooperative federalism in Indian politics. Ultimately, the study concludes that coalition politics strengthens Indian democracy by accommodating diverse social interests, preventing excessive centralization of power, and preserving the pluralistic character of the Indian constitutional order. In synthesizing the two decades of governance, the conclusion is that Coalition politics in India is irrefutably a "Reality," not a "Myth." The structural paradoxes of Indian democracy managing deep socio-economic inequalities, resolving internal security threats, and accommodating linguistic diversity cannot be resolved by the homogenization efforts of a single dominant party. The 2024 electoral verdict is a definitive validation of this theory, returning the Indian state to its collaborative, bargaining-oriented federal roots. Ultimately, coalition politics safeguards the asymmetrical federalism of India, ensuring that the diverse voices mobilized during the democratic upsurges continue to resonate within the corridors of national power.

A critical evaluation confirms that coalition politics fundamentally strengthens Indian democracy. By integrating diverse regional, linguistic, and caste interests into the central executive, coalitions prevent majoritarian overreach and ensure equitable resource distribution. While coalitions can lead to policy paralysis (as seen in UPA-II), they also prevent the rapid, shock-implementation of flawed policies (e.g., Demonetization, Farm Laws) by enforcing rigorous parliamentary and federal scrutiny. Regional parties remain vital veto players, ensuring the institutional autonomy of federal structures and preventing the unchecked weaponization of central agencies.

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