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A Study On Formation And Achievements Of Second Coalition Ministry (1967-1971) In Odisha After Independence

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ABSTRACT

Coalition Politics is a reflex of continuous and living interaction between a political party's natural and hence ultimate quest to come to power by itself, the expedient and perhaps essentially transitional interparty collaboration to capture reins of power. Coalitions are formed mainly by two participants. However, there may exist more than two participants in a coalition. India, the largest democracy of the world has witnessed the formation of coalition ministry in the states as well as in the centre. During the first three quarters of 20th century, coalitional politics in Odisha bears the records of several events of kaleidoscopic changes and is marked with the activities of various leading personalities which required an analytical study for proper assessment. The present paper attempts to explore the background of the formation of second coalition ministry (1967-1971) in Odisha after the independence and its achievements. This paper also briefly highlights the pre-poll alliance of Swatantra Party and Jana Congress Party and role of two prominent leaders of the coalition, Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo and Harekrushna Mahatab respectively. The reason behinds the fall of this coalition ministry are also touched.

Keywords: Coalition, Politics, Political, Ministry, Democracy, Independence

Introduction:

A coalition is “a political or parliamentary grouping less permanent than a faction or a party or an interest group”. It is an offshoot of competitive multi-party political system in the event of inability of any single party to form a ministry or government commanding a working majority in the lower House of Parliament.¹ In a bi-party political system, coalition may also be formed in times of national crisis for the sake of suspension of party strife and the concentration of all forces in a common direction for common safety. Coalition formation can take only within the context of mixed motives in which both common interests and conflicts are simultaneously present. Coalition may be permanent and may have integrative effects on politics depending upon the political scenario.² Whatever may be the situation in which a coalition ministry is formed, its formation involves some remarkable points of departure from the well-established norms of parliamentary

democracy which is characterized by real heads and nominal heads, ministerial responsibilities, powerful cabinets, accountability of the opposition, influential legislative leadership and stable government etc.³

Coalition ministry is a product of politics in a parliamentary democracy. It is a form of development due to the exigencies of a multi-party system in a democratic set up. It is a type of ministry constituted or formed when any single party is unable to secure majority on its own. Thus in a democratic system based upon a majority party system, such a situation enables a number of minority parties to come together and form a coalition ministry. Coalition of political parties may take form either prior to the elections, called as Pre-poll Alliance or after the elections, called as Post-poll Alliance.⁴ The study of coalition politics assumed great importance in India because of the conversion of dominant one party system i.e., into a multi party system. Politics in India is always bound to be coalitional contained within various political parties and functioning within the rules of what Robert Dhal calls as a “Polyarchical Democracy”. In this land of minorities based on caste, culture, religion and language, neither a single group or party is in a position to determine the destiny of entire nation, nor there a stable combination of minorities that can retain its decisive role over a long period of time.⁵

The state of Odisha, despite a rich cultural history, a long coastal belt, abundance natural resources and manpower resources, still is one of the backward states in India. Political stability has been a chimera and lack of continuity in programmes and policies of the state government stood in the way of progress. The political instability after the Independence to Emergency caused a severe damage in development of the state. It was during 1947-1977, six Assembly elections took place in the state of Odisha and six ministries were set of in Odisha. Except 1961 Assembly Election, any single party was unable to form the government alone. Although there were three coalition ministries formed during that period but except 1961, in almost all ministries, we had seen the role of minor parties in the formation of government.

The fourth general elections of 1967 marked the end of the dominance of Congress Party which resulted in the emergence of non-Congress ministries in seven out of the then seventeen states, thus constituting a break in monopoly of ruling power by the Congress Party. The Congress Party retained its majority in the states of Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Gujarat, Mysore, Haryana, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The Regional Party of Tamil Nadu, D.M.K. formed its government in the state. In the remaining eight states, coalition of non-Congress parties explored the possibility of formation of Government and achieved some measures of success.⁶

Under the charismatic leadership of Biju Patnaik, the Congress Party got single majority in 1961 Assembly Election and formed the government in Odisha. Biju Patnaik’s dynamism and lust for rapid industrialization as also his promises along with the feasibility of their implementation did not carry any further sense, and the political opponents within the Congress Party whom he silenced during 1961 election gathered strength and courage to revolt against his deals. Harekrushna Mahatab’s faction joined the opposition in exposing and sometimes overexposing the pitfalls of Biju Patnaik’s leadership that led Odisha bankruptcy, though there was still a lot to make the state of Odisha industrially advanced. Harekrushna Mahatab faction failed to check Biju Patnaik’s ambitions despite protests from both outside and inside the Congress Party. This led some prominent dissatisfied leaders of Congress Party including Harekrushna Mahatab, Pabitra Mohan Pradhan and Surendra Patnaik etc. to their decision to quit Congress and formed a regional party known as the Jana Congress party on 5 May 1966.⁷ One MP and eleven MLAs joined this newly formed party.

The Ganatantra Parishad which merged with the Swatantra Party in 1962 was converted into the Provincial Unit of the Swatantra Party was seeking the earliest opportunity to defeat the Congress Party and come to power. The Swatantra Party’s state unit was led by Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo while the newly created Jana Congress was led by Harekrushna Mahatab. Although there was rivalry between Singh Deo and Mahatab but

both of them sought help of each other to fight against their common political enemy, Biju Patnaik and his political party, Congress. Both Jana Congress Party and Swatantra Party made a pre-poll alliance before the general elections of 1967. Both the political parties signed an agreement on the basis of 21-point common programme for forming a coalition ministry or government in Odisha. They combined on the basis of a common minimum programme to defeat the Congress Party in the Assembly Election of 1967.⁸

Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo and Harekrushna Mahatab, the leaders of the alliance, both Swatantra Party and Jana Congress Party applied all sorts of tactic, programmes and plans to win the voters in their favour. When the results of 1967 Assembly Election was declared all were astounded to find that the Swatantra Party had obtained 49 seats polling 22.58% of votes and the Jana Congress Party obtained 26 seats polling 13.47% of votes. The ruling Congress Party could poll only 30.62% of votes and secured only 31 seats in the 140 member assembly.⁹ The Jana Congress-Swatantra Party alliance got the absolute majority of 75 seats and formed a coalition ministry with Swatantra Party leader, Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo as the Chief Minister of Odisha and Jana Congress Party leader, Pabitra Mohan Pradhan as the Deputy Chief Minister. It was noteworthy that the victory of the Praja Socialist Party was overwhelming having 21 seats in the Odisha Assembly. The Bharatiya Jana Sangha, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Samyukta Socialist Party entered the electoral battle in the state of Odisha for the first time and failed to take the advantage of anti-Congress wave in Odisha.¹⁰

The Coalition Ministry of Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo worked hard to implement the 21 point common programme as assured in their election manifesto. These programmes included important matters like; abolition of land revenue, appointment of Lokayukta and Lokpal in line with the recommendation made by the Administrative Reforms Commission appointed by the Government of India, and such other matters including appointment of an Inquiry Commission to probe the alleged corruption of the Congress ministers holding office on 23 June 1961 to March 1967. Most of commitments made in the 21 point common programme were implemented.¹¹ But nothing except the appointment of the Commission of Inquiry caused a serious problem to the coalition ministry.

The coalition ministry instituted a Commission of Inquiry under the Justice H.R. Khanna, a retired judge of High Court of Delhi to probe into the allegations against three former Chief Ministers and fourteen ministers who held the office from 1961 to 1967. All these ministers were charged with scandals of moral turpitude and corruption. The Commission of Inquiry submitted the report on 15 January 1969 after two years exonerating the accused of all charges except administrative improprieties.

Singh Deo's coalition ministry had also appointed J.R. Mudholkar, a retired judge of the Supreme Court to probe certain charges and allegations leveled by the Leader of the Opposition, Sadashiva Tripathy against Harekrushna Mahatab, Santanu Kumar Das, Nabakrushna Choudhury and Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo. After investigation, the Mudholkar Commission exonerated all except Harekrushna Mahatab against whom three charges were justified.¹²

The coalition ministry of Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo was in power from 8 March 1967 to 9 January 1971. During these four years, the coalition ministry of Singh Deo could provide a stable government. As the leader of coalition ministry, Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo maintained cordial relation with his coalition partners. All most all important decisions were taken unanimously in consultation with the leaders of coalition. For nearly two and half years, there was a cohesive unity in the coalition ministry having no outside and inside threat. The government tried its best to implement the 21 point of common (pre-election) programme. Although Harekrushna Mahatab was the senior and most prominent leader in the coalition but Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo never fulfilled the undue request of Mahatab and never allowed his interference in the coalition

government as a result of which he had to pay a heavy price of it. The coalition government always maintained its transparency in all spheres of activities even Mudholkar Commission was instituted to probe the alleged allegations against Chief Minister Singh Deo and his ministers. It bears the instance of Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo's transparency, integrity and commitment to an immaculate administration and desire for good governance. For the first time in the political history of Odisha, R.N. Singh Deo's coalition government was dissolved without losing any vote of confidence in the floor of the Assembly.¹³ This Coalition Ministry was fall only for the selfish interest of some highly politically ambitious leaders.

The Coalition Ministry of R.N. Singh Deo had undertaken a number of welfare measures such as prohibition, reforming the supply system or the benefit of the public of Odisha. In order to curb the corruption from the administration, this coalition government was in favour of introduction of Lokpal in the state. Due to the pioneering effort of R.N. Singh Deo, Odisha became the first state in the country to abolish the Land Revenue for encouraging the farmers. This coalition ministry also initiated model steps in respect of water supply, water cess, rehabilitation and relief work during drought and flood. Various measures were adopted by the government to strengthen the financial status of Odisha. This coalition ministry ensured law and order in the state and boldly suppressed the student movement of 1969 and streamlined an effective police administration in the state. This coalition government further brought reforms and modification in the industrial policy of the state for development of small scale and large scale industries in Odisha.¹⁴ During this coalition ministry, Berhampur and Sambalpur Universities were formed in the year 1967. The Anti-Conversion Bill was passed in Odisha Assembly in 1967. Odisha was the first state to bring such law named as "Odisha Freedom of Religion Act, 1967".

When the Coalition Ministry was functioning smoothly by R. N. Singh Deo, in the last half of 1970, there was a drastic change took place in the political scenario of Congress Party Odisha unit. Dissatisfied with Indira Gandhi's decision of the selection of candidate for Rajya Sabha MP and differences of opinion regarding organizational issue with Congress High Command, Biju Patnaik along with his followers resigned from the Congress Party and formed a new regional party named "Utkal Congress" in 1970. At the same time, Harekrushna Mahatab, the leader of Jana Congress Party who was waiting for an opportunity to join Congress got a chance to join the party after Biju Patnaik's resignation from Congress Party. With the secession of the Congress Party Odisha Unit faction which was opposing Mahatab, the Jana Congress Party decided to rejoin the Congress Party against the will of some party members who were not very much willing to break the coalition ministry. Finally a resolution was adopted by the Jana Congress in August 1970 calling for fresh election with the withdrawal of support of Jana Congress Party on 9 January 1971 on the ground of charges of corruption against the Swatantra Party ministers on the question of grant of remission to some Kendu leaf traders, the Chief Minister resigned recommending President's rule in Odisha.¹⁵ Thus the Jana Congress-Swatantra coalition ministry which was the first non-Congress coalition in Odisha collapsed in 1971.

Conclusion:

The controversy that the non-Congress political parties are responsible for political instability after the Independence in the state of Odisha is not based on facts. On the other hand, the non-Congress coalition ministry formed in the year 1967 showed remarkable stability. The attempts made by the opportunistic partners to share governmental power after the 1967 general elections in many states of India to provide a viable alternative to the Congress rule proved a failure. West Bengal, Bihar, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh experimented upon coalition ministry which proved unstable. In Odisha, the Jana Congress-Swatantra front not only gained stability in terms of survival but it was stable in other respects too having gained an absolute majority of 75 seats in 140 member Assembly and the support of nine out of the then 13 districts. It was the only coalition ministry which presented a model of stable non-Congress ministry in India. While the non-Congress coalition ministries were formed in seven states after the 1967 general elections, the coalition ministry in Odisha was last to fall. Thus it may be observed that the formation of successive coalition ministry heralded a new phase in the politics of the state of Odisha. The coalition provided a convenient framework for binding diverse forces in a workable pattern, symbolizing the beginning of the politics of compromise and accommodation and the spirit of mutual respect and tolerance which is important in a developing democracy characterized by self-contained socio-political units.

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