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Impact Of Party System On Indian Federalism

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Abstract

India is a democratic country. India practices the federal democratic political system since independence. Federalism is a kind of political system in which constitutional powers of nations are distributed between union (Centre) and units (states). Centre and State are autonomous and have independence in their respective areas. In the Indian Constitution, powers are distributed through three lists. However, parties and their politics significantly push for the shifts in Federal structure also. Parties contest elections and formulate policies after assuming political power for the betterment of society. Indian National Congress was the single dominant party for two decades after independence. Gradually, regional political parties started evolving in the political system in India. The rise of regional parties resulted into coalition politics in India. However, the nature of party system again turned to one party dominant system when Bhartiya Janata Party came into power in the year of 2014. Therefore, given the different working style of the parties in government, federalism has undergone through various changes as per the shifts in the political parties in power. In the year of 2014, political leadership changed in India and the government of the day advocated for the cooperative and competitive federalism by projecting various changes to the system to enhance the cooperation and autonomy among states. Although the Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has taken various steps to transform Indian federalism, Steps taken could not abstain themselves from harsh criticism. This symbolizes the party politics impacting the change in the nature of federal politics also. The objective of this paper is to study and explore the impact of party politics on India's federal practices. This paper will identify the established federal practices before Modi era and subsequently the changes in federal politics in India. This paper will also focus on exploring the factors that pushing the government in bringing shifts in the federal principles.

Key Words- Indian Federalism, Centre, State, Party system

Introduction-Federalism is a type of political system in which powers are divided between levels of government. Federalism has been the most preferable type of political system in the contemporary world. It resulted from the specific circumstances like war, economic crisis, colonial effect, social and political crisis in many countries. Federalism as a political system was accepted and adopted on the basis of the needs of various countries. It depicts that federalism is a dynamic concept. Ronald L. Watts writes that “there is no single pure model of federation that is applicable everywhere. Rather the basic notion of involving the combination of shared rule for some purposes and self - rule for others within a single political system so that neither is subordinate to the other has been applied in different ways to fit different circumstances”¹. The model of federalism does not follow the uniformity of structure.

India adopted the federal political system since independence. Historically India was not a federal country. At the time when India was the victim of British colonialism, centralisation was the prominent feature of Indian political system. Britishers ruled over the whole of India through highly centralised political system. They fully controlled all the provinces. The Government of India Act 1919, commonly known as Montague-Chelmsford report, was the first tiny step towards federation by introducing Diarchy but it did not get success. Federalism has been given a shape by the Government of India Act of 1935 (hereinafter after referred as “**1935 Act**”). The 1935 Act introduced the federal structure of India with the process of decentralisation.

India adopted parliamentary form of democracy since independence. In the parliamentarian form of democracy political process becomes significant. Political process is a key figure in maintaining the flow of democratization of a country. In the political process of a democracy political parties remain significant players. Political party is group of individuals sharing common ideology with collective aspiration to get into the power. Political parties are inseparable part of any democratic political system. The role increases during the elections process when political parties establish candidates and take part in the elections by regular election campaigns and contesting elections. Political parties, not only contest elections but also prepares grounds for the political socializations. Political parties create public opinion by adopting various means of mass media, print media etc. Social networking campaigns are the recent invention in the electoral process a country. Political parties are adopting modern means of campaigns by which they try to create the favourable public opinion to get benefitted in the election process. “Political parties and the party system in India have been greatly influenced by cultural diversity, social, ethnic, caste, community and religious pluralism, traditions of the nationalist movement, contrasting styles of party leadership and ideological perspectives faced. The two main categories of political parties in India are National and State, and the Electoral Commission of India recognizes them as such based on certain specific criteria. Regional parties are stronger in many states compared to national parties”² (Bharti: 2022, 79). Despite the fact that national parties have the dominance in the political system, many regional parties have formed the sub-national government in various states of North and South India entirely based on their own capacities and capabilities.

Political Parties and Indian Federalism – Political parties have played a crucial role in social and political transformation, but party dominance has also undergone enormous changes. A multitude of new parties emerged and many of them became ruling parties at the national, state or both levels. During the decades following independence, the plural and federal character of India's polity quickly asserted itself.

At the time of India's freedom struggle, Congress was the single dominating political parties regulating all the figures of independence. However, many other political parties started emerging but the heights of congress were still untouched. When India became an independent sovereign country in the year of 1947, Congress party, officially named as 'Indian National Congress', became the ruling entity. The party system during the first two decades after independence is known as single party dominant system. However, India adopted multi-party system but it was a single dominant party ruling over the country. Rajni Kothari termed the years of Indian party system as "Congress System"³ (Kothari 1964). The influence of congress party started decreasing in the late 1960s. Within two decades of first general elections, the impact of Congress falls down in the year of 1967. Other national and state political parties emerged in the Indian political system. In many states of India, the dominance of Congress became lesser as state political parties formed government there. For e.g., in the state of Tamil Nadu, DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) led coalition formed the government by defeating the Indian National Congress in the fourth legislative assembly elections. The years of 1967 marked structural change in the political system of India. This resulted into competitive party system in place of dominant political system. The massive domination of Congress has eroded that party lost majority in state assembly elections of eight states, namely Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras/Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Rajasthan, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh over sixteen states apart. Haque and Ghosh said that "the national proportion of votes in Congress fell from 44.7% to 40.8%. The election dealt a terrible blow to the dominance of Congress"⁴(Haque and Ghosh: 2022, 33).

However, the return of Indira Gandhi into power flipped the party politics structure of Indian political system. She adopted confrontational posture both towards opposition parties at national level and towards non-Congress governments in various states. The shift in the party system after Indira Gandhi changed the nature of Indian federal system. She removed the governors of non-congress party ruling states. "She created a 'pyramidal type of decision-making structure' in party as well as in government. Indira Gandhi started purging politicians such as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Assam and Madhya Pradesh. Earlier, all disputes in the party were resolved through the Congress High Command but she started resolving all the conflicts at intra-party level. Jayaprakash Narayan symbolized it as 'Indira is India and India is Indira.' As a result, India was poised towards 'one party dominant system to one-party authoritative rule'"⁵(Haque and Ghosh: 2022, 33). The shift in power from Indira Gandhi to Rajeev Gandhi led certain hopes for the party politics along with the federal political structure of the country. However, the era of Rajeev Gandhi did not reflect desirable changes as he followed the working practices of his mother. The years of 1989 marked the shift in the structure of political system. The era of coalition government started in Indian politics. Coalition government is the form of government whereby no single party gets majority in the general elections. The era led to the emergence of multi-party rule with coalition politics in India. The beginning of coalition politics changed the dynamics of Centre-state relation to a certain extent. Participation of many

regional political parties in the coalition government at the Centre level reflects the significant shift from centralised governance to shared rule and federal governance. The rise of regional parties at the Centre impacted the federal structure by the formation of coalition government at Centre level. The emergence of regional parties at Centre resulted into weak government at the national level. Instability, lack of collective decisions and incompleteness of tenure were some of the tenets of coalition government. The demands concerning state autonomy increased in the period of coalition government. Every party to the Centre coalition attempts to assert its own geographical, cultural and economic interests in the political process. The regional parties started focusing on the development of their own region instead of focussing on the development of the nation as a whole.

National Front under the leadership of V.P. Singh formed the government at the Centre in 1989. “Singh's National Front government was a coalition among disparate individuals and parties to remain the Congress (I) out of power. The alliance started to fall apart because of the partisan interests and personality squabbles. Under the leadership of Prime Minister, P. V. Narsimha Rao, minority government was formed at the Centre in June 1991. On the one hand, the Rao government was successful in initiating economic reforms, it pursued liberalization and globalization much to the satisfaction of the World Bank- International Monetary Fund (IMP) combine, and side by side it failed to promote value-based politics”⁶ (Sarkar: 2016, 62). The government of Rao successfully completed the tenure. The next Lok Sabha elections witnessed the serious crisis in the political system in India when no party even the coalition got the majority to form the government. However, National government formed but no party got successes in completing its tenure. The 13th Lok Sabha election held on October 1999 (somewhat delayed because of Kargil war) and the BJP-led omnibus alliance of 24 parties [the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)] got a comfortable working majority. Atal Bihari Vajpayee sworn as the Prime Minister of India. The shift in political system arose with the change in the leadership in the 14th General Assembly elections when Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) formed the government. UPA successfully returned to the power for the next tenure in the leadership of Dr. Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister of India. Federal fabric of India witnessed several issues as states were demanding autonomy along with review of Centre- state relations in India. In light of demands by states, Dr. Singh formed Punchhi commission to review the dynamics of Centre- state relations in India. However, the recommendations made by Punchhi Commission did not get structural form much. The year of 2014 witnessed major shift in power as BJP led alliance National Democratic Alliance (NDA) formed the government with the single majority party.

Political Party and Indian Federalism From 2014 Onwards- The general Lok Sabha election of 2014 marked the history of Indian political system. It was the return of single majority party at the Centre place after 1889. BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) established its government at the Centre, although it was the victory of BJP, single majoritarian party. Shri Narendra Modi became the leader of majority party and sworn as the Prime Minister of India. During election campaigning, he promised to provide stage to states for their ideas and demands in the functioning of Centre- state relations. After becoming the Prime Minister of India, he started some new trends in Indian federalism through the initiation of the idea of ‘Cooperative Federalism in India.’

“The process of progressing towards cooperative federalism envisaged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is reflected in the policy initiative like 14th finance commission recommendation to increase in the share of divisible tax pool from 32 percent to 42 percent and transferring 68 percent divisible pool to the states. The larger transfers to the states are accompanied by the significant reduction in the central scheme and rationalization of remaining schemes to give greater flexibility and control to individual states”⁷ (Jain 2020: 53). Narendra Modi during a programme in Hyderabad said that, “The Centre will join hands with the states in working towards goal since it is possible only with the cooperative federalism, wherein the Centre and states work together”⁸ (Chandrashekhar: 2016). Various new initiatives have been taken in the new era of cooperative federalism in India.

National Institution for Transforming India commonly known as NITI Aayog is one of the major initiatives taken for the path of cooperative federalism in India by Prime Minister Modi. NITI Aayog replaced the Planning commission, the previously established institute for the policy making in India, which was established by India’s first Prime Minister Nehru. PM Modi replaced it with NITI Aayog by arguing that it would have the direct role of states in the policy formulation for the nation which was missing in the Planning commission. Fiscal dimension of Centre- state relation has been the significant arena of discussion from starting. States used to demand for more financial autonomy through adding in the revenue generated from union tax for the developmental works in the states. Narendra Modi, to foster the idea of cooperative federalism accepted the recommendation of 14th finance commission. “Considering all factors, in view, increasing the share of tax devolution to 42 percent of the divisible would serve the twin objectives of increasing the flow of unconditional transfer to the states and yet leave appropriate fiscal space for the union to carry out specific purpose transfers to the states”⁹ (Nain: 2018, 588). Centre government by accepting the demands provided autonomy to states in economic sphere to regulate the working as their own way. The Central government and state governments have jointly launched several initiatives and schemes, such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) and the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (Prime Minister’s Irrigation Scheme). These initiatives have been designed to address national-level challenges, with the involvement of state governments in planning and implementation. The Prime Minister and his cabinet regularly interact with state governments, seeking their feedback and ideas on policy initiatives. The Inter-State Council, which is a constitutional body, provides a platform for the Central and state governments to discuss issues of common interest.

Despite efforts to promote cooperatives federalism, there have been tensions between the Central government and some states. The Present government has to face several criticisms in order to governance. One of the criticisms of National Democratic Alliance is from Parliamentary government to Prime Ministerial government. In the recent years the working of BJP led NDA has changed the political scenario of India and immensely affected the working of Indian federalism. BJP’s massive victory in the general elections of 2014 was the return of single party dominance in the realm of Indian political system. Modi government’s initial election promises led to the creation of NITI Aayog for the implementation of cooperative federalism in India. NITI Aayog, the replacement of Planning Commission, has many challenges such as grants distribution authority for India, lack of expertise, smaller in size.

Conclusion - For the effective functioning of federalism in Indian, it is needed to provide some financial autonomy to the states. State's claims for the financial freedom should be in consideration by the centre government. Although Modi accepted their demands and also the recommendation of 14th finance commission but state's dependency over centre in this dimension should be reduce. Centre- state relations should be effective by straight communication and proper understanding of each other by both. States are more aware of the regional issues and local level problems so autonomy of decisions should be increase for the better development of the states. NITI Aayog is working forward in this particular direction and adopting hand-in hand approach to foster cooperative federalism in India. The controversial figure of governor should work as per the constitutional provisions instead of personal prevailing conditions of the centre government. Centre's domination over concurrent list along with state list should be reduce. Article 356 of the constitution should be used only with the failure of constitutional machinery of the states. Indian federalism can be strengthening by developing a democratic approach towards states and proving them enough representation in the national level institutions.

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