

# Rainbow Coalition

With so many prime ministerial aspirants in the fray the general election of 2009 could be a game changing event. In other words government formation post-16th May cannot be anything but complicated. Then horse-trading is now part of the game. The Congress party was the first to announce its prime ministerial candidate while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) followed the suit in no time. The point at issue is regional satraps too are running for the top post. Making alliance in Indian parliamentary democracy is an art. But breaking alliance at an opportune moment is equally artistic. Just by changing side right becomes left overnight because this is the biggest show-piece of democracy.

Regional overlords who call the shots in the devolved framework of political power are notorious for poor governance and venality. And yet regionalism in Indian polity is getting so pervasive that national parties (or mainstream parties) are steadily losing their national character and ideological orientation as well.

The decline of Congress from the status of the colossus straddling the national scene started way back in 1967. But 1989 signalled the end of the hegemony of the Congress Party as its share of the Lok Sabha (house of the people)—the directly elected chamber of parliament—plummeted from the 415 (of 543) seats by the party in December 1984 to just 197 seats in November 1989. The party's old strategy of brahmin-harijan-advansi-muslim coalition didn't work anymore as more and more social groups, marginalised, and not so marginalised, particularly in north India lost faith in the grand old party for varying reasons. Then dynastic culture coupled with Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism took its toll. Despite some stability in Congress camp in recent years, the party's vote share hovers around or below 25 percent mark. With progressive fragmentation and political disorder and BJP in all likelihood getting to breach the 20 percent mark in vote market it demands a hell lot of astuteness to maintain even a semblance of pre-dominance at the support level. The Gandhis and Singhs are no answer to the emerging challenge.

The gradual decimation of Congress party's traditional base seems irreversible. And the rise of BJP seems to have reached a point beyond which it finds no ray of hope. In truth the political assertiveness of low and middle castes (or classes) at the expense of landowning classes (or castes) is a factor that affects all parties that hope to reach New Delhi. Then too much of regionalism has paved the way for criminalisation of politics in a big way.

In Uttar Pradesh where Mayawati with her dalit outfit—Bahujan Samaj Party—is projecting herself as the next prime minister of India, criminalisation of politics is so rampant and deep-rooted that democracy mocks at itself. Jail-birds are hailed as liberators of the down-trodden and everybody enjoys surfeit of democracy! The New Delhi-based Association for Democratic Reforms says 46 parliamentary candidates in the current field of 268 in Uttar Pradesh have police records. And many of them have earned enormous notoreity in cruelty. Bihar doesn't lag behind in terms of fielding candidates with criminal antecedents. India's parliamentary politics has been transformed drastically since 1989 by the relentless rise of regional parties representing caste, sub-caste, ethnic and

linguistic groups (and parts thereof) and the ever growing criminalisation of political process. All are intent on fishing in troubled waters because it is the easiest way to make quick fortunes.

The hard reality is that regional kings and queens just resort to rhetoric while doing virtually nothing to address the constituencies they represent. As for Mayawati, the self-styled dalit crusader who has built her power base on demagogic 'caste war fare' without offering any viable and workable social project for caste annihilation, what matters most is manipulative politics. And her reverse casteism does hardly weaken the caste structure without which dalits cannot liberate themselves from the juggernaut of social oppression. Mayawati victory is being seen by her dalit supporters as a great leap forward but she has no intention to end the caste system and divisive politics which in turn strengthens caste structure. Also she has no programme about the nation's women whose representation in parliament is well under 10 percent even after fourteen general elections, albeit a proposal to reserve a third of parliamentary seats—and in the same proportion in state legislatures for women members has been under consideration for over a decade.

Most regional parties, including Mayawati's BSP, have no economic agenda of their own. They just dance to the tune of market controlled by upper class (caste) people and their foreign masters. Nor do they talk anything substantial about India's foreign policy because they are too local to formulate anything called foreign policy. Their one-point programme is reservation. They start with reservation and, they end in reservation. And only caste-based reservation is important to them because it can translate directly into opportunities—places at universities, jobs in the public sector or government contracts. And their short-term interest—nobody thinks of long-term interest—can be best served in a rainbow coalition. □□□