

Together they rip

Crass expediency, not public interest, determines political coalitions in India

On the psephological map of India the contours of "coalition politics" appear to meet an inglorious end. The habit of flirting with various motives for forging alliances however never seems to end. Such a trend began in 1967 in Uttar Pradesh, when Charan Singh switched from the Congress to lead the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal.

The first coalition government in India had a stint of ten months. UP is again at the centre stage of coalition culture. Two parties, ideologically poles apart, have shown a political empathy which proves the dubious nature of coalition politics. Now that Mayawati has proven herself on the floor of the UP assembly, the events of the past three weeks in the state must be seen as a dress rehearsal for the possible outcome of the 1996 general elections.

The National Front has come up with various strategies to woo the electorate. Not to be left behind, the Congress, too, has begun its networking games with an eye on the forthcoming general elections. The Bharatiya Janata Party, in its turn, has proved beforehand the extent to which it can go by backing the Bahujan Samaj Party in UP and the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam — in the latter, the BJP backed the AGP's candidate in the recently concluded Rajya Sabha elections in the state.

Little wonder then that as election time draws near, coalitions also get a kick start. It is often believed that such a polarisation of forces helps to simplify issues for the electorate, giving them the chance to choose from a few alternatives. Countering the trend by dubbing it opportunistic misses the point.

For, in retrospect, "coalition politics" is a fallout of the malnourished growth of the Indian party system and the consequent failure of the rise of an alternative party like the near monolithic Congress. This apart, the slow growth of a political culture and consciousness among the rank and file of the Indian population, along with the absence of polarisation of socio-economic issues on strictly political terms, has also been an aggravating factor.

The loose multi-party structure owes its genesis to the inability of political parties to either harness diverse issues or act as the representatives of cross sections of the citizenry. The swelling number of parties and the fragmented allegiance of the Indian population are indicative of the heterogeneous nature of both the Indian elite and the masses. These pave the way for fluid interaction within diverse groups.

Prior to 1967, the Congress could claim to be representative of Indian society sui generis. Additional factors like Jawaharlal Nehru's personal charisma and India's border conflicts

helped maintain a semblance of "togetherness" within the Congress. Post-1967 India witnessed not only the rise of regional parties on the plea of developmental imbalances, but also gave birth to hosts of dissenters and self proclaimed rebels. This was only too evident in tapestry of parties on the political canvas. Besides, a substantial section of the Indian population grew conscious of their respective identities and consequently felt the need to have their share of the scarce resources of a proclaimed welfare state, even at the expense of others. The politics of "clientele satisfaction" — mandatory for one's own political ticket — gave the politicians the fillip to divide both the issues and the people with claims and counter claims.

Indira Gandhi dubbed the conglomerate alliance under the Janata umbrella as forces of "coalition and chaos", while the latter projected its stand as a fight between "democracy and dictatorship". But the grand experiment of coalition of 1977 gave birth only to some ambition mongers such as Charan Singh. Indira Gandhi not only returned with a thumping majority, but

By RANA SARKAR

also paved the way for her son, who at the end of his tenure, faced another coalition. History repeated itself.

Within two years, V.P. Singh became aware of the negative aspects of coalitions. In states such as UP, Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Bengal, Bihar and Kerala, the drama of coalitions has been enacted several times from 1967 onwards. In many cases it failed. Some, like the Left Front of West Bengal, have managed to survive mainly because of the hegemony of a single party.

But parties still pin their hopes on coalitions. The possibility of such undertakings demands scrutiny. For India, the structure of authority, along with the show of allegiance to a power holder, reflect an extrapolitical genre. This makes coalitions untenable.

Shouldering or backing another party different in creed may look artificial. But as hegemony in India is far from a true reshuffle, a coalition is best equipped to aspire for power on the plea of safeguarding utopian ambitions like "democracy", "secularism" or the protection of backward or minority rights. Such alliances do not, however, reflect ground realities. Neither do they take into account the social tensions that exist on the lower rungs of society. A handshake at the top does not mean that social groups at the base also merge.

The recent BJP-BSP alliance has caused jubilation in the saffron ranks; for it humbled Kanshi Ram. The BJP leaders have promised to better the sit-

uation for the upper castes who were marginalised in the aftermath of the Samajwadi Party-BSP victory. Further, the ruling alliance which followed and which has just been dismantled proved the dichotomy between various sections of the Dalits — "backward" and "dominant". The Kurmis resented the Yadavs' hold on the state apparatus and the way in which Mulayam Singh — for obvious reasons — pampered them. The Kurmis are now likely to strangle the scheduled castes. By which fact it follows all the talk of "social harmony" by BJP leaders and Mayawati that she is the true representative falls flat.

Alliances between the so called secular parties look tenable. They have, in fact, emerged as a useful tool for political survival for those parties unlikely or unable to come to assume power on their individual credibilities. Most of these parties, who have either sprung from diverse bases or are estranged from their parent bodies, are not always ready to take the backseat.

This leads us to the kind of situation where coalitions emerge as potential breeding grounds for future defectors. Consider the facts. Chandrashekar — opportunely — defected with his own followers; V.P. Singh lost power. Mulayam Singh split the National Front and formed the Samajwadi Party. And, now, the BSP has played down its previous "ideological" rifts with the BJP and sought succour in the latter even as it has brought down the defector — Mulayam Singh — himself.

Divisions exist on the prima facie consideration of whom to exclude and whom to support. In this, too, there might emerge differences of opinion. Therefore, while the four Janata Dal members in the UP assembly supported the BJP-BSP alliance, the party high command feigns disinterest, even as V.P. Singh toys with the idea of not treating the BSP as an outcast. The UP melodrama has thrown up too many issues for the different parties to handle. These — like the inevitable problems that arise even after an alliance is forged — are however not as important as the larger indications for the Indian polity that they lead to.

First, that India can now hardly expect to have any true opposition party since courting yesterday's rivals has become the practice. Second, that all the talk of secularism is stripped of all meaning. More so after the BSP has fallen prey to the BJP's wiles. Even the CPI(M) and Janata Dal now note the religious composition of constituencies. Third, the movement of the Dalits and victimised minorities has proved how stooges are churned from their own base. It is also a lesson in how the elite — from among the Dalits themselves — can blackmail their causes and aspirations.