

CHAPTER-4

BJP TASTES POWER: 1998-2004

It's Rise under Bajpai's Premiership

Hardly twenty months (but three Prime Ministers) after the May 1996 general election, India again went to the polls in February/March 1998. The brief life of the eleventh Lok Sabha was marked by political grandstanding and manipulation, leading to two changes of government in quick succession.

In the last election, BJP won 161 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha, making it the single largest party but short of a majority. The BJP leader, Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was sworn in as Prime Minister, but resigned 13 days later, when it became clear that he would lose a vote of confidence in the House. A 13-party coalition, the United Front, assumed power, supported (from outside government) by the Congress Party, which had ruled India for 45 of the 49 years since independence. The Front consist of the Janata Dal (which had been in power from December 1989 to November 1990), the Left Front and various left-leaning regional parties. After some difficulty, the Front chose the newly elected Chief Minister of Kamataka state, Mr. H. D. Deve Gowda, to be Prime Minister. Mr. Deve Gowda's government however fell in April 1997, when the Congress withdrew support, in a deceptive bid by its President, octogenarian Sitaram Kesri, to capture power. He was unsuccessful, and another United Front nominee, Mr. I. K. Gujral became Prime Minister. Congress support to his government was equally indecisive, and was withdrawn in November 1997, after an inquiry report suggested that the DMK party of Tamil Nadu (part of the United Front), was responsible for security lapses leading to the May 1991 assassination of its former leader, Rajiv Gandhi. The Congress demanded their removal from government, but the United Front instead chose to dissolve the Lok Sabha, and call fresh elections.

ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND ISSUES

In four phases, spread over 19 days, between February 16, 1998 and March 7, 1998, an electorate of around 600 million went to the polls, by most accounts relatively fairly and peacefully. The elections, covering 539 of the 543 constituencies in the country, were conducted under the supervision of the three-member Election Commission, which maintained its recently acquired activist profile.

In the Lok Sabha Elections, 1998, the BJP gave the slogan of “stable government and able leadership”. It continued to project the social, economic, cultural, national and regional issues during the election. In the 1998 elections the BJP leadership again tried not to use its Hindutva platform during the campaign. Contentious issues were kept aside by senior leaders and there was an emphasis on economic issues such as swadeshi.¹⁰⁹ The party put forth Atal Bihari Vajpayee, perceived as the moderate face of the BJP, as its prime ministerial candidate and adopted the slogan of “stable government, able PM.” In six election meetings, Vajpayee gave speeches in major Uttar Pradesh towns in late January in which he made no reference to the Ayodhya temple issue. Instead, he focused on the price of onions, the problems of sugarcane farmers, the Bofors bribe scandal, and attempted reassurances to Muslims that they had nothing to panic from the BJP.¹¹⁰

During his campaign speeches, Advani emphasized stability as the main plank of his party, with concern over corruption in high places coming a close second. He pointed out that such contentious issues as the construction of the Ram temple, a common civil code for all communities, and the Bofors problem were raised by Sonia Gandhi, and that the BJP-unlike in 1989 and 1991-would not have done so. He also argued that for the first time there was a positive attitude toward his party on the part of the electorate despite having been labeled by the INC as anti-secular.¹¹¹ The party manifesto mentioned that the BJP planned to build the Ram temple but would achieve this goal by exploring consensual, legal, and constitutional means. However, Advani mentioned that this issue, along with the demand for a common civil code and other items, could be dropped after achieving victory if a coalition had to be formed, and the party’s basic program would rest upon consensus. In an election meeting held in Ayodhya, Advani repeated that the temple would be built but emphasized that there had been a change in attitude toward this issue among the minority community and the public at large.

The BJP continued its efforts to moderate its ideology after the elections. At the party’s April 1998 National Executive meeting in New Delhi, Advani asked party members to abandon the core idea of Hindutva in the interests of producing a stable coalition government and creating a “new, softer BJP.” This meant that hereafter stability would

¹⁰⁹ In the context of globalization it means “self-reliance,” particularly protection of domestic producers’ interests

¹¹⁰ Sudha Pai, “New Political Trends in Uttar Pradesh: The BJP and the Lok Sabha Elections 1998,” EPW (July 11-17, 1998), p. 1841-45.

¹¹¹ “Choice Between BJP and Instability,” Hindu, January 23, 1998.

be more important than any ideological issue, and the national agenda the BJP formed with allies would prevail over its own election manifesto. Advani's speech changed the party's definition of nationalism-until now synonymous with Hindutva and building of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya-to one of building a "Rashtra Mandir" (National temple), meaning creating a prosperous and secure country for all citizens. It also indicated the need for a new national consensus and the healing of any divisions that may have appeared in the body politic.¹¹²

It was in its 1998 election manifesto that the BJP tried to take a clearer view on economic issues. "It sent out signals to Indian industry that the Party shares their perception on development of national industry with gradual reform, first by opening the domestic market and then creating a competitive environment. Only in the second phase, were doors to foreign competition to be opened."¹¹³ It was further stated in the manifesto, "The BJP is fully aware that, when it comes to power, it will be inheriting a badly managed economy and a badly directed reform process. The broad agenda of the BJP will be guided by Swadeshi or economic nationalism."¹¹⁴ According to the manifesto, "Every nation advocated free trade in all global force, but in practice, they compulsively resort to quotas, tariffs and anti-dumping measures to protect their national interests. ...while the declared agenda is free trade, the undeclared but actual agenda is economic nationalism. India, too, must follow its own national agenda."¹¹⁵

Like other issues the BJP utilized Article 370 too to gain electoral mileage. In its 1998 Election Manifesto, it was stated by the Party that "The BJP will abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution".¹¹⁶

The BJP has throughout nurtured the belief that cow protection is the living symbol of Indian culture and is inseparably linked with the economy of the country since ages. In its 1998 election manifesto it was stated that "it is on the patient back of the cow and its progeny that entire structure of Indian agricultural rests. Over seven crore animals are employed in farming operations in Indian villages; more than 80 per cent of the rural transports needs are met by the bullock carts. Our live stock is also an effective protection against environmental degradation."¹¹⁷

¹¹² "Advani Promises 'New' Softer BJP," Indian Express (New Delhi), April 12, 1997.

¹¹³ Partha Ghosh, *BJP and the Evolution of Hindu Nationalism: from periphery to centre*, p. 258.

¹¹⁴ Election Manifesto, BJP, 1998, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 10-11.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 28.

Although the campaign focused mainly on the personalities of the pre-eminent political leaders, and on the rival planks of a “stable government” (promised by the BJP) or a “secular government” (promised by everyone else), most polls suggest that other issues equally concerned the average voter. These concerns, like rising prices, law and order, and the lack of civic amenities, were however hardly reflected in political discourse or in the media. Perhaps because of the recent spread of the electronic media, voters’ skepticism with the electoral process, and with politicians’ promises, was articulated. However, turnout of voters was unaffected by this skepticism, rising from 58% in 1996 to 62% in 1998, the second-highest in Lok Sabha elections. Turnout varied widely from state to state as it often does, but significantly, did not drop, as in past mid-term elections.

The advent of distinct state party system at regional level, separated but closely linked to national party system. The regional parties were dominant players at state level, national and state parties contended for power. By and large, with the breakdown of the dominant party system, Indian polity entered into transitional period, characterized by fluid, fragmented political formation and unstable coalition governments, on one side and the multi-party system at national level, moving towards federalization, on the other.¹¹⁸

The results from the 12th Lok Sabha in 1998 confirmed the overall tendency towards “regionalization of Indian politics”, and prolonged construction of Vajpayee’s thirteen parties’ coalition government in late March 1998, demonstrated that Indian Prime Minister would be made and unmade in state capitals, rather than in Delhi. Most of the political parties recognized the importance of pragmatic electoral alliance, except INC, which subsequently strengthened the range of regional political formations.¹¹⁹

The parliamentary elections of 1996, produced as much fragmented and polarize picture, as previous elections in the party system. The complex pattern of inter-party alliance continued as a ‘patchwork’ quilt at the Centre as well as state levels. Three major contenders as the Congress, the BJP, and the UF were in the electoral contest in

¹¹⁸ Sudha Pai, “Transformation of Indian Party System: The 1996 Lok Sabha Elections”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXXVI, No.12, December 1996, p. 1170.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Rise to Power of the BJP”, in Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, New Delhi: OxfordUniversity, 2001, p. 14.

1998 national elections.¹²⁰ The UF lacked unified leadership as its leaders, such as Jyoti Basu, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Deve Gowda and G.K. Moopanar etc., were much busy to strengthen their own regional support base, rather than work for unity and integrity of the United Front. None of them came forward to save the sinking boat of the United Front in 1998 mid-term elections. The BJP vigorously searched for new friends because, party tried to avoid previous humiliation, as no one extended support to the Vajpayee government in 1996 except, pre-poll partners.

The BJP forged number of pre-poll arrangements with various regional parties, such as Samata Party, Lok Shakti Party, AIADMK, Trinamool Congress, Biju Janata Dal etc. and also matured post-poll alignments with TDP. Three regional parties and few independents, added twenty two seats in NDA kitty, which led to slight parliamentary majority to BJP.¹²¹ The BJP moderated its own ideology and tried to accommodate the demands of its allies during and after the elections. BJP abandoned the core idea of *Hindutva* and turned to a “new softer BJP.” That is, the party was moving towards ‘*Ram Mandir*’ (Lord Rama Temple) to ‘*Rashtra Mandir*’ (national temple), meaning thereby, creating a prosperous and secure country for all citizens.¹²² In contrast, the Congress failed to learn the importance of alliance politics early in the electoral campaign. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), Kerala Congress (Mani) and few smaller groups allied with INC, as they had in 1996 polls.

Paul Wallace summarized the alliance system as a ‘bi-model party system,’ by which, two major or national parties were maneuvering within a larger vortex of smaller regional parties. According to the scholar, bi-model term was accurate, because both the BJP and the Congress were capable of forging a majority coalition or were in a position to bring down the government, given favourable circumstances.¹²³ Sudha Pai also repeated same idea as ‘two-polar situation.’ The BJP went to the voters with slogans’ of ‘majboot’, ‘swachcha’, and ‘sthir sarkar’ (strong, clean and stable government), that is, stable regime and good governance. The BJP nominated Atal

¹²⁰ M. P. Singh and Rekha Saxena, “India at the Polls: Parliamentary Elections in Federal Phase”, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003, p. 124.

¹²¹ Sudha Pai, “The Indian Party System under Transformation: Lok Sabha Elections 1998”, Asian Survey, Vol. XXXVIII, No.9, September 1998, p.838.

¹²² Ibid. p. 843-846.

¹²³ Paul Wallace, “Introduction: India’s 1998 Elections—Hindutva, The Tail Wags the Elephant and Pokharan”, in Ramashray Roy and Paul Wallace (eds.), Indian Politics and the 1998 Elections: Regionalism, Hindutva and State Politics, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999, p.17.

Bihari Vajpayee as prime ministerial candidate, seemingly to capitalize on liberal outlook and national image.

The results of 12th general elections revealed that BJP and its allies captured 255 seats in the Lok Sabha, which reflected its extended territory beyond the Hindi belt bringing the party into the center of power. The Congress and its partners got 170 seats only. The United Front (UF) was totally washed away in the elections and was reduced to just eighty three seats.

The outcome of the elections was another hung Parliament. Although the BJP won more seats than any other party, it (with its allies) was able to muster only 251 of the 539 seats. The Congress and its allies came in second, with 167 seats. The United Front fared badly, dropping from 174 seats to 100. Interestingly, although 40 distinct political parties found place in the new Lok Sabha (in addition to six independents), all but 21 of the new MPs fell into one of the three main pre-election coalitions.

The electorate delivered a strong anti-incumbent verdict. Almost half the seats changed hands, and half the sitting members seeking re-election lost. In most states, the party in power in the state government performed badly in the Lok Sabha elections. Alliances were generally successful, particularly the BJP's alliance with four regional parties (led by a former Chief Minister, MS Jayalalitha of the AIADMK party) in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This alliance won 30 of the state's 39 seats, up from zero in 1996. (This performance was a significant humiliation for most pundits and pollsters, who did not predict such gains.)

Extraordinarily, the BJP and its allies demonstrated good electoral performance in each of the four regions of the country. They secured 86 out of 151 seats in Northern region, 61 out of 118 seats in Western region. 53 out of the 142 seats in Eastern region and 50 seats out of 132 in Southern region. The first ever increasing performance of the BJP in Southern and Eastern coastal belt can be definitely credited to its new partners like TrinMool Congress (TMC) of Mamta Banerjee in West Bengal, BJD of Naveen Patnaik in Orissa, AIADMK of J. Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu and Lok Shakti of Ram Krishna Hegde in Karnataka.

Besides the BJP and its allies did well among the cross sections of the Indian voters. They secured maximum percentage of votes from upper castes Hindus (56%), OBC (42%), Uneducated (31%), Lower educated groups (37%), Middle educated groups (42%), Higher educated groups (49%), Rural section (35%), Urban section (41%), Males (39%) and Females (33%) of votes. Thus, the BJP and its allies crossed their

traditional barricades mostly. But they had not performed well so far as the Muslims (secured only 7% of votes) and Scheduled Tribes are concerned. Again the big anti-incumbency swings in Rajasthan, Haryana and Maharashtra affected the party adversely.

In the elections of 1998, the BJP's share of the national vote was 25.5 per cent, or 5.2 percentage points more than its national vote share in 1996. It won 182 seats, up only 21 seats from its national total in 1996. Yet the party comes to the twelfth Lok Sabha at the head of an alliance of 252 Members of Parliament, with hopes of being able, in the words of its spokesperson, to "rope in" even more members. It had done so despite substantial losses in States of relative strength, such as Maharashtra and Rajasthan, and relative stagnation in the two States that give it 42 per cent of its MPs, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. (See Table 17)

A combination of factors brought the BJP and its allies to the Lok Sabha in such large numbers. Of them, the most important is undoubtedly the alliances the BJP struck in different parts of India after the elections were announced. And of these, the most important new alliances were with the AIADMK and its allies in Tamil Nadu, the Lok Shakti in Karnataka, the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa and the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal. It added these alliances to its longer-term ties with the Samata Party in Bihar (extended to Uttar Pradesh in 1998), the Haryana Vikas Party, the Shiromani Akali Dal (the alliance was established after the 1996 election) and with the Shiv Sena, its most natural ally, in Maharashtra. The BJP in 1998 was a substantial beneficiary of the splits in the Janata Dal and the nationwide decline of that party, particularly in two States in which the Janata Dal had a substantial presence Karnataka and Orissa. In some States the BJP benefited directly from disunity among the forces opposed to it. This was the case, most importantly, in U.P., and also in Gujarat.

In establishing electoral alliances, the BJP was in a class of its own. In its bid for government, it decided that it would not be constrained by any inhibitions of principle with regard to whom it chose as allies. Thus, in Tamil Nadu, it allied with the leader of what was arguably the most corrupt State Government in independent India, in Karnataka it allied with a person who was steering simultaneous negotiations with the Congress (I), and in Orissa it allied with a party named after a secular politician who consistently opposed the BJP.

These alliances did, however, bring instant electoral advantage. In the southern States, out of 50 seats won by the BJP alliance, only 20 were won by the BJP itself. The

alliance's vote share in these States was 33.9 per cent; the BJP's individual share was 16.6 per cent. (The South here refers to Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh; Kerala remains the only major State never to have sent a BJP candidate to the Lok Sabha.) In the East (Orissa, West Bengal and Bihar), of 53 seats won by the BJP alliance, only 27 were won by the BJP. (Of them, 19 were won in Bihar alone.) The vote share of the BJP and its allies in this region was 37.4 per cent; the vote share of the BJP alone was 16.6 per cent.

The most unexpected gain for the alliance came, of course, in Tamil Nadu, where it won 30 out of 39 seats. The victory of the alliance here was also perhaps the most serious reversals suffered by the U.F. in the elections. (Indeed, Jayalalitha can well be considered the major victor of Elections 1998, with Sharad Pawar as runner-up.)

At the national level, the seats the BJP won through alliances in the South and East were crucial compensation for its losses in Maharashtra and Rajasthan and its relative stagnation in U.P. Apart from gains in terms of seats for the alliance as a whole, the alliances brought other political gains for the BJP. Thanks to its alliances, it had established political and organisational footholds in new regions, particularly in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. And it had gained, through shared campaigns, access to sections of the Indian people to whom it had no such access even a few months ago.

The decline of the Janata Dal at the all India level had, of course, damaged the United Front, and the BJP had moved in to benefit from this decline in Karnataka and Orissa. The data on the three States Bihar, Orissa and Karnataka in which the decline of the Janata Dal had been most noteworthy after its many splits were interesting. In 1996 in Bihar, the vote share of the Janata Dal was 32 per cent. In 1998, the Janata Dal's vote share was 7.9 per cent and the vote share of the RJD 24.1 per cent, a combined total of 32 per cent. In Orissa, the Janata Dal's vote share in 1996 was 13.0 per cent; in 1998, this fell to 5.0 per cent, with the BJD winning 27.8 per cent of the popular vote.

In Karnataka as well, it was clear that the alliance with the Lok Shakti was crucial for the BJP. The Janata Dal's vote share in Karnataka was 34.9 per cent in 1996; in 1998, the Janata Dal's share fell to 21.7 per cent, while the Lok Shakti won 11.5 per cent of the vote (the combined total, 33.2 per cent, was again very close to the 1996 vote share of the Janata Dal). While the Congress' vote share increased from 30.3 per cent in 1996 to 36.2 per cent in 1998, the BJP's vote share rose only marginally, from 24.8 per cent in 1996 to 27.0 per cent in 1998. Once it had formed the alliance with the Lok Shakti,

however, a fragmented vote ensured that it won the single largest block of seats in the State. (If, on the other hand, Ramakrishna Hegde had chosen to jump from the fence to the Congress, the Karnataka scene was likely to have been very different.)

The decline of the Congress had been identified as a major factor in the BJP's electoral gains of the 1996 elections. In 1998, although this factor did (or may have) come into play in certain States for instance, in U.P., Bihar, Orissa, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh it was perhaps a less significant factor than in 1996. Significantly, Congress consolidation in Maharashtra and Rajasthan, predominantly the former, handed out the most serious reversals of Elections 1998 to the BJP. In Maharashtra, the joint vote share of the Sena-BJP combine remained close to stagnant (38.6 per cent in 1996 and 41.6 per cent in 1998). Holding its ground, however, was not enough for the alliance. Sharad Pawar worked early to bring the Republican Party of India and the Samajwadi Party into alliance with the Congress, and the Congress fought the election with a degree of unity rare in the Maharashtra unit of the Congress. The party's vote share rose from 34.9 per cent in 1996 to 43.5 per cent in 1998, and it dealt the Hindutva combine a setback whose strength few would have dared to predict.

In Madhya Pradesh, although the BJP enhanced its position in terms of its share of the vote (41.3 per cent in 1996 and 45.9 per cent in 1998) and seats (27 in 1996 and 30 in 1998), its gains were small and were not based, as in the past, on a decline of the Congress vote. The Congress' vote share in Madhya Pradesh improved from 31.0 per cent in 1996 to 38.4 per cent in 1998. (See Table 17)

In Gujarat, despite the split from its ranks of the Rashtriya Janata Party, the BJP's vote share fell only slightly, from 48.5 per cent in 1996 to 47.7 per cent in 1998. The BJP's gains in the election were obviously helped along by the division of votes between the Congress and the Rashtriya Janata Party. The Congress share of the vote remained almost the same 38.7 per cent in 1996 and 37.9 per cent in 1998 and the RJP, a new entrant in the 1998 elections, won 9.4 per cent of the popular vote.

Uttar Pradesh was at once the BJP's strength and its weakness. It was its strength because it had 55 MPs from the State, nearly a third of its total in the Lok Sabha. It was its weakness because, first, despite all its efforts and the decline of the Congress, its vote share was relatively stagnant (33.4 per cent in 1996 and 36.4 per cent in 1998). Secondly, the BJP remains utterly vulnerable if non-Congress non-BJP unity were to be achieved. The combined vote share of the S.P. and Bahujan Samaj Party in 1998 was 49.6 per cent (28.7 per cent and 20.9 per cent respectively). The data in this context

are quite dramatic: the combined total of the votes polled by the BSP and S.P. were higher than the votes polled by the candidates of each other party in about 64 constituencies in the State. The BJP gained more votes than the combined total of the S.P. and BSP in 19 constituencies. Quite clearly, if the electoral unity between the S.P. and BSP that had been urged by the Left before the elections had been achieved, U.P. would have seen very different results.

Bihar was another fascinating case of BJP vulnerability. Unlike Orissa and Karnataka, Bihar was not a State where the BJP took away the winnings when the Janata Dal split. In point of fact, BJP's vote share had been stagnant (20.5 per cent in 1996 and 21.3 per cent in 1998); so too had been the share of its allied the Samata Party (14.4 per cent in 1996 and 14.6 per cent in 1998). Although both parties had made gains in the number of seats they had won, there can be little doubt that the BJP's performance in the State fell well below its expectations.

Table: 17, Electoral Performance of the BJP, 1998 Parliamentary Election

Sr. No.	STATE/UT	Seats			Votes Polled (%)
		Total	Contested	Won	
1	ANDHRA PRADESH	42	38	4	18.3
2	ARUNACHAL PRADESH	2	2	0	21.75
3	ASSAM	14	14	1	24.47
4	BIHAR	54	32	20	24.03
5	GOA	2	2	0	30.04
6	GUJARAT	26	26	19	48.28
7	HARYANA	10	6	1	18.89
8	HIMACHAL PRADESH	4	4	3	51.43
9	JAMMU & KASHMIR	6	6	2	28.64
10	KARNATAKA	28	18	13	26.95
11	KERALA	20	20	0	8.02
12	MADHYA PRADESH	40	40	30	45.73
13	MAHARASHTRA	48	25	4	22.49
14	MANIPUR	2	1	0	12.61
15	MEGHALAYA	2	2	0	9.01

16	MIZORAM	1	1	0	2.94
17	NAGALAND	1	-	-	-
18	ORISSA	21	9	7	21.19
19	PUNJAB	13	3	3	11.67
20	RAJASTHAN	25	25	5	41.65
21	SIKKIM	1	-	-	6.86
22	TAMIL NADU	39	5	3	6.86
23	TRIPURA	2	2	0	8.19
24	UTTAR PRADESH	85	82	57	36.49
25	WEST BENGAL	42	14	1	10.2
26	ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS	1	1	0	35.33
27	CHANDIGARH	1	1	1	42.36
28	DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI	1	1	1	53.73
29	DAMAN & DIU	1	1	1	41.96
30	DELHI	7	7	6	50.73
31	PONDICHERRY	1	-	-	-
	TOTAL	543	388	182	25.59%

Source: STATISTICAL REPORT ON GENERAL ELECTIONS, 1998 TO THE TWELFTH LOK SABHA, VOLUME I Election Commission of India.

The 1998 election results indicate that, for all its public announcements that it was a party whose time had come, the BJP was, electorally speaking, a strong but peculiarly vulnerable party. Its strength in the twelfth Lok Sabha was based, first, on alliances with parties whose reasons for allying with the BJP were at least as self-seeking and opportunist as the BJP's reasons for allying with them, and, secondly, on seats won in States U.P. was the prime example where its strength seems to have peaked and where it was dependent on the disunity of its opponents for sustenance.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, emerged as a leader of largest party/coalition in the popular House, and he was invited by K.R. Narayana, President of India to form the government and win a 'vote of confidence', on the floor of the House. Vajpayee government did it, when TDP accepted the post of Speaker in Lok Sabha and G.M.C. Balayogi was elected for same, on 24 March 1998. The BJP worked hard and succeeded in putting together

eighteen parties' coalition known as the NDA since then. After coming into power, the Vajpayee ministry conducted 'Pokharan-II nuclear tests', in May 1998, which brought unity to fractious coalition and enabled the BJP to avoid substantive debate within the government on economic and political issues that were more troublesome and potentially dangerous to the existence of the NDA.¹²⁴ Right from the beginning, the NDA ministry was weak and it faced various restraints. The 'trident demands' of NDA allies such as Trinamool

Congress, Samata Party and AIADMK wanting to removal of West Bengal, Bihar and Tamil Nadu state governments, respectively. The SAD (B) and INLD demanded to roll back in oil prices and certain essential commodities, respectively increased the vulnerability of the central government.¹²⁵ Under the pressure of its allies, the BJP tried to impose 'President's rule' in Bihar and to some extent rolled back the prices of petroleum products to appease Samata party, INLD and SAD (B), to make sure continued support for government.

The AIADMK leader Jayalalitha wanted removal of DMK ministry in Tamil Nadu and also dropping of corruption cases against her. When her demands were not accommodated by NDA, she withdrew its support from the ruling coalition. Even then, the NDA leadership confidently believed to survive, but story changed with a last minute withdrawal of support by the BSP, in apparent revenge for BJP's machinations in bringing down Mayawati government in Uttar Pradesh when she was the Chief Minister. In a way, Union Cabinet fell by rarest of margins of single vote 269 votes in favour of the NDA government and 270 votes against it. It was Pyrrhic victory for the Congress Party and the Left parties, preparing to bring down Council of Minister, but they failed to fulfill the complete modalities for forming the next coalition government.¹²⁶

The 12th Lok Sabha had special features to its credit. (I) BJP tried to transform itself into a 'responsible national party,' that was, seen as less untouchable or anti-secular. (II) There was emergence of bi-polar inclination which created a fragile and transitory coalitional government. (III) The changes occurred in state level party system, the regional parties, allied either with the BJP or the INC tried improving their political

¹²⁴ Shaila Seshia, "Divide and Rule in Indian Party Politics, The Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party", Asian Survey, Vol. XXXVIII, No.11, November 1998, p.1048.

¹²⁵ Yogesh Atal, The Mandate for Political Transition: Re-emergence of Vajpayee, Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 2003, p.23.

¹²⁶ Devesh Kapur, "India in 1999", Asian Survey, Vol. 40, No.1, January-February, 2000, p.195-196.

position, in their respective states and increased their bargaining power with Centre. However, these alliances were neither ideological nor did they have common objective to strengthen them together. These were merely short term strategic arrangement developed by ambitious politicians that were entrenched in the exchange of shared benefits and the compulsions of power. Consequently, regionalization of politics in state level was important and continuing factor in determining present national party system.¹²⁷ (IV) It was the first time; a government was based on pre-poll adjustments and headed by a larger political party as BJP. (V) Almost all partners shared power with the BJP, unlike previous governments, except, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress.¹²⁸

The Indian polity jumped into the 'post-Congress era.' It did not mean that Congress come to an end to be a major player; indeed, it continued to be a major player in all but in few states. In simple words, it was 'post-Congress polity', in the sense that the party come to an end to be the pole around which the political competition was structured.¹²⁹

1999 LOK SABHA ELECTION

The general election to the Lok Sabha called in April 1999 was the third in as many years. The general election results in March 1998 produced a hung parliament in which the BJP was the largest party. The BJP was able to form a coalition government with the support of a number of regional parties but stability eluded it. The government was a minority administration in which a number of individual parties were in a crucial position. These parties, though supporters of the coalition, held enough seats to tip the balance in a no-confidence vote. One party in particular, the AIADMK from Tamil Nadu, misused this position of strength and made a series of demands to which the BJP would not allow. The government fell in April 1999 following a confidence vote in which the AIADMK opposed the BJP coalition. The election was scheduled for September 1999 and it was decided that a number of state assembly elections should held at the same time. These included elections in the important states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The election established the regionalization of national politics in India that had been deceptive for a number of years. The elections also

¹²⁷ Sudha Pai, op. cit. p. 849-851.

¹²⁸ Kushal Pal, "Coalition Government at Centre", Third Concept, Vol. 12, No. 138, August 1998, pp.16-17.

¹²⁹ Anthony Heath and Yogendra Yadav, "The United Colours of Congress: Social Profile of Congress Voters, 1996 and 1998" in Hasan, p.128.

delivered useful evidence with which to evaluate the character and strengths of the two leading parties: the BJP and the Congress Party.

FORMATION OF NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE

The political scene in 1999, seemed to be as fragmented as in the previous elections during 1990s. The 13-party BJP-led NDA alliance stayed reasonably cohesive despite the fall of its government. One alliance partner the AIADMK, abandoned it, but AIADMK's main rival in Tamil Nadu, the DMK, compensated the loss by joining the BJP alliance. During the course of the tenure of the Vajpayee government, the AIADMK had lobbied for dismissal of the DMK government in Tamil Nadu. The smaller allies of the AIADMK-the PMK, MDMK and TRC in the BJP-led coalition and later, in a shift of loyalties, allied with the DMK. Nonetheless, the DMK's former ally in Tamil Nadu, the TMC, broke its ties with the DMK after DMK general council formally resolved to join the NDA. Karunanidhi later clarified that party's joining the NDA did not mean its endorsement of that '*Hindutva* concept will continue to be committed to minority community'.¹³⁰ The DMK thus strengthened the secular block in the NDA, which consisted of, informally, the Samata Party, TDP, National Conference, BJD, etc. Beside the BJP-DMK and Congress-AIADMK alliances in Tamil Nadu, the TMC leaders - G.K Moopanar, K. Krisnnasamy with Puthiya Thamilagam, an independent leader, formed a third front in the states. The Progressive People's Front included the JD (Secular), RPI and Dalit Panthers. The main plank of the front was its campaign against religious fundamentalism and corruption.

The BJP-led federal alliance had included three regional parties in the north-west: the National Conference, Akali Dal (Badal), and Indian National Lok Dal. Akali Dal and National Conference stood confidently with the BJP-led coalition government. The presence of these two parties, both ruling in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, strengthened the BJP-coalition government in New Delhi. In July 1999, the HVP government in Haryana led by Bansi Lal all of a sudden fell because of the withdrawal of Congress support and because of a split in the HVP. That offered an opportunity to Chautala to form an alternative government as a joint candidate of INLD, BJP and HVP

¹³⁰ Indian Recorder, 2-8 July, 1999, p. 4587.

rebels. But relations between INLD and BJP were not without problems. Chautala was inclined to vote against the Vajpayee government in the crucial confidence motion on the issue of the withdrawal of subsidies to farmers, but, he finally joined at the eleventh hour and contested the midterm polls as an ally of the NDA.

The BJP-led allies met on 15th May, 1999 and gave their alliance a formal collective name, the National Democratic Alliance. The constituents retained their distinct identities but decided to contest the upcoming elections using a common manifesto under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee of BJP. The Telugu- Desam, Trinamool Congress and National Conference were concerned about the impact of their alliance with the BJP on their significant Muslim electorate in their respective states. Nonetheless, they were not present in this meeting but they in due course stuck to the alliance.

Moreover the DMK, another major group to join the NDA in July, 1999 was a major faction of the Janata Dal. The JD chief minister of Karnataka, J.H. Patel, individually decided to join the NDA. The move was opposed by the majority in National Political Affairs Committee of the party, but Sharad Yadav faction in the committee rebelled and joined forces with the majority faction in the Karnataka Janata Dal in their move to build bridges with the NDA. Indeed, the NDA allies, the Samata Party and Lok Shakti, also merged with the rebel Janata Dal and formed a new party, Janata Dal (United). The main Janata Dal under H.D. Deve Gowda now became the Janta Dal (Secular). It stayed out of the NDA.

The NDA still remained a confederal inter-party formation. There was no move to form a federal party like the Janata Party in 1977. The constituent parties had formally merged into the Janata Party. Composition of the NDA was much more diverse in regional and cultural terms than the Janata Party, which was essentially a north-Indian phenomenon. The NDA has become an all-India affair.

ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND ISSUES

The BJP re-nominated nearly 62 per cent of the sitting MPs of the dissolved Lok Sabha. 59 percent of the Congress candidates were new. Splits in the Congress Party had increased the number of regional parties. The slow breakdown of the Janata Dal since 1989 had also added to the ranks of the regional parties. The rise of the BJP and the emergence of the regional parties on the national stage define the context of the 1999

general election. Taken together they demonstrate the collapse of the dominant Congress party system.

Superficially the 1999 election can be seen as a contest between two national parties, the BJP and Congress, each at the head of their own alliances. However, the proliferation of political parties and the partial nature of the two main alliances had complicated the matter. The outgoing parliament in 1999 contained no less than 37 parties and six independent MPs. Neither of the two national parties was in a position to win a national mandate in 1999. The BJP was the largest party after the 1998 election but even so it was 90 seats short of a majority in a 545 seat house. The notion of what it is to be a national party in India needs clarification. The BJP and Congress described themselves as national parties but in both cases the claim required critical treatment. It was true that a concept of the nation was an important part of their organizational identity. However neither party fielded a full quota of candidates in 1999. Congress was ahead in this category with 453 out of a possible 543 candidates. The BJP only contested 339 seats. In terms of votes won these parties together won 51.4 per cent of the vote in 1998 and there was no reason to anticipate a major change in 1999. The Congress Party gathered support in pockets across the country but was especially weak in the large northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. These two states elect 54 and 85 MPs respectively. In contrast the BJP could not win votes without allies in southern and eastern India. Nevertheless both parties won sufficient seats to stand apart from the variety of smaller parties that make a technical claim, under rules set out by the Election Commission, to be national parties.

One consequence of the fragmentation of the Indian party system was that it became ever more difficult to talk of a meaningful national campaign. Outcomes were dependent on particular electoral alliances and a variety of local issues. The states acted as fairly self-contained political systems each with a divergent political configuration. Regional parties, now so important in the Indian party system, organized their campaigns on a regional basis. They also mobilized voters by promoting regional identities and issues. It was in the interest of the BJP and the Congress Party to keep the notion of a national political ground alive. They endorsed the idea of the nation over the region and hoped to move the focus to national issues that will make the regional parties appear irrelevant, though the BJP had to approach this issue with care. The Congress Party made the issue of a stable national government by one party a central plank of its campaign strategy. The party vacillated on the key issues of secularism and

the economy. Before the campaign it was suggested that the party was prepared to dilute its commitment to pro-market reforms and favour stronger pro-poor policies. However Congress also gave parliamentary support to the BJP's attempts to deepen the reform process a few months before the election. Congress made a campaign pitch for the minority vote claiming that, unlike the BJP, it was a sincerely secular party that could be trustworthy to protect the minorities. However it was put forward in January 1999 that support for secularism would not destabilize the interests of the Hindu majority.¹³¹

The issue of leadership was given a high profile by both national parties. The Congress Party pursued to project Sonia Gandhi as a national leader. Following the assassination in 1991 of her husband and former Prime Minister, Rajiv, Sonia remained detached from politics. She finished her isolation by participating in the Congress general election campaign in 1998 and became leader of the party later that year. It was expected that the association with the Nehru–Gandhi family would work in the party's favour. The choice of a political beginner as leader provided further indication of the Congress decline. Rather than aiming for reelection on the basis of a robust party organization it was expected that dynastic appeal would provide a convenient shortcut to power. The BJP claimed that Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the serving Prime Minister, was an exceptional leader. Vajpayee had sophisticated the image of a liberal statesmanlike figure, which was deployed to full effect in public events and campaign advertising. His reputation for moderation was used to endorse the impression that the BJP, having foregone its contentious policies, was now a trustworthy mainstream party. The emphasis on leadership meant that Sonia Gandhi's citizenship became an issue. She was an accepted, rather than a native born, Indian citizen. It was claimed that Sonia Gandhi was not qualified to become Prime Minister should Congress form a government after the election. The issue was raised again and again in the campaign by a variety of figures within the BJP alliance though Vajpayee himself did not wish to be accompanying with such negative strategies.

Since 1991, when the Congress government accelerated the process of liberalisation of the economy, there had been a growing conjunction of ideological perspectives, at least, among the larger parties and alliances. Thus, both the NDA and Congress and its allies were broadly in favour of neo-classical, pro-market economic reforms, without

¹³¹ Asian Age, 16 January 1999

fully writing off the role of the State in the economy and providing with protectionist policies for domestic industries. The common manifesto of the NDA, was mostly recycled from the National Agenda for Governance 1998, which was issued before the polls.

The old leftists wanted the complete control of state on industry while the rightist wanted to leave it to the market. But the NDA rejected both the approaches. According to it government and industry must work together to achieve main objectives. It will enrich the vitality of the market with effective and efficient control of the state. The NDA was neither in favour of capitalism nor in favour of socialism completely but it aimed at to establish society in which the citizens could demand and obtain all sorts of public goods.¹³²

The congress repeated its strong assurance to faster economic reforms with a human face. It pronounced that higher growth was possible only if we invested more in physical and social infrastructure and only if the pattern of public expenses at all levels reflected persistent socio-economic priorities and needs of the poor, the unemployed, the depressed, the malnourished and the disadvantaged of India.¹³³

The differences among parties on economic and cultural identity issues largely overlapped. The division among parties on economic issues expressed itself between neo-liberal market reforms and economic nationalism public welfarism. The cultural difference was between Hindu nationalism and Indian secularism. Nonetheless, the ruling NDA coalition effectively put an end to the debate of secular-communal conflict by dropping the contentious issues of the Ram temple, Common Civil Code and Article 370 of the Constitution in relation to Jammu and Kashmir, from the common parties, even though the Janata Party manifesto of the pre-1999 elections had been included by them. The BJP did not issue a separate manifesto in 1999. Yet, the parties which were not in the NDA continued to allege the BJP of admitting and practising Hindu communalism to the disadvantage of the minorities.

On India's foreign policy, the national unanimity on non-alignment and nuclearisation for peaceful purposes tended to break down in the post-Cold War and post- Pokharan-II periods. Neither the NDA nor the Congress manifesto mentioned non-alignment in

¹³² NDA, Agenda for a Proud, Prosperous India, Lok Sabha 1999, An Agenda for a Proud, Prosperous India, NDA, 11 Ashoka Road, New Delhi, 1999.

¹³³ Indian National Congress (I), General Election Manifesto 1999, Congress (I) Publication, 1999, New Delhi, AICC, 24 Akbar Road. 1999.

the recent elections. The NDA manifesto, however, was dedicated to make the voice of India as the voice of the developing world.¹³⁴ There was no attempt to develop India's nuclear doctrine in changed context of both India and Pakistan going nuclear. Not even the Congress manifesto mentioned it which in 1999 underlined the need for the foreign policy to be supported by the enormous majority of the people. Foreign policy must have strong domestic roots and must reflect domestic priorities and concerns.¹³⁵ The Congress and BJP appeared to display themselves as nationalist while in opposition, and globalist when in government. They came to power in the 1990s only in a minority. Hence, there was an obligation to act on a multi-party consensus or create one when required.

Recent electoral trends had shown that the incumbency factor had emerged as a good predictor of elections in the sense that a party in power was hardly returned to office in the following elections. This was the advent of mature voter assessing the performance of governments in office. The 1999 mid-term polls were held in an unusual atmosphere. Although the previous election had been under normal conditions and the inflation rate had been below two per cent for many years, the Kargil war was thrust upon the nation unexpectedly between the fall of one government and the holding of the subsequent polls. This was both a bane as well as a boon for the government.

Kargil created nationalist passion in the face of blatant aggression. Almost all parts of the country sorrowed deaths of officers and jawans on the front. There was, exceptional diplomatic support from the international community, including, the USA. Finally, India succeeded in its limited military objective of preventing invaders from the Line of Control. The nationalist rise came to the rescue of Vajpayee government.

The BJP tried to win over the voters through a sympathy wave. Its election campaign mostly reflected this wave. For example, one of its election pamphlets had specified: What wrong did this man do? Kya Kasoor Tha Iss Aadmi Ka?

He recognized India's self-respect by conducting the Pokhran blasts, extended a hand of friendship with the bus ride to Lahore, and took the economy back on the rails? Provided farmers with credit cards, resolved more than 100 years old Kaveri water dispute, ensured free education for girls up to the university level.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ NDA Agenda for a proud, prosperous India, Op. Cit. p.8.

¹³⁵ Indian National Congress (I), General Election Manifesto 1999,

¹³⁶ The Times of India, 17 April, 1999.

Another pamphlet said ‘as a friend, he can travel far to shake a hand. When betrayed, he can crush it with a Kargil. In just 17 months, he transformed recession into growth. Imagine what he will do in five years.’¹³⁷ BJP in this way pursued to woo the voters through the sympathy wave created by the Kargil as well as the Congressional disloyalty. Thus the party had been very active in endorsing alliances all over the country. Its tactic finally paid and the party returned to power with a strength of 300 seats in the Lok Sabha in 1999.

Notwithstanding the long shadow cast by Kargil on the mandate of 1999, political parties stepped up an energetic campaign spread over almost two months owing to the five-phase polling in different parts of the country. Indeed, it was a swift shift of the scene from the war front to the hustling. Elections moved in three different knocks conducted mainly by different sets of personnel: national, regional and local. The national circuit, this time, was almost entirely monopolized by the BJP’s Atal Bihari Vajpayee and from the Congress, Sonia Gandhi’s son Rahul, daughter Priyanka.

The regional campaigning was dominated in different states by regional leaders. They campaigned hard in their home states, many of them, especially the larger regional players, were contesting in alliance with one or the other major national parties, but these alliances were largely loaded in favour of the regional partners, especially, when it came to the division and sharing of Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha seats. This situation can be judged from the fact that Jayalalitha kept Sonia Gandhi waiting during the campaign for nearly an hour at a joint Congress-AIADMK rally in Tamil Nadu before finally regretting her absence. This indicated the relationship between national and regional parties before the 1999 polls. The emphasis was on the local issues, clusters of village settlements and urban colonies.

As in the recent previous elections, the Election Commission of India played a great role in ensuring a free and fair poll. It again worked out schedule of campaign broadcasts and telecasted on the government managed electronic media by the recognized political parties free of cost. However, it prescribed paid advertisements by parties on private TV channels to diminish the influence of money power during elections and ensure parity for all parties. The commission made sure the implementation of the model code of conduct and did not hesitate in curbing even the big leaders of land. Also the presence of the three chiefs of the armed forces at a

¹³⁷ The Times of India, 26 August, 1999.

meeting addressed by the prime minister in Haryana was an obvious exploitation of the Kargil war for electoral gains.¹³⁸

The commission also attempted to stop the broadcasting of exit-poll results conducted during the early phases of the polls till the completion of the last phase of voting so that early voting trend do not influence the voting behaviour of the latter voters. However, the commission's order to this effect was challenged in the Supreme Court and overturned which deceived the institutional rivalry of the judges against the commissioners.¹³⁹

In short, the NDA fought elections on the issues like Kargil War, Pokhran-11, sympathy with Vajpayee, National Agenda for Governance and Foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi. The nuclear explosion at Pokhran in May, 1998 paved the way for India to enter into an elite nuclear club. Similarly the Kargil War also created nationalist fervor in the face of blatant aggression. Almost all parts of country moaned officers and jawans on the front. There was exceptional diplomatic support from international community. Finally, India succeeded in its limited military objective of preventing the invaders from LoC. The impact of these events appeared to be a sort of boost to Indian nationalism which the NDA tried its level best to exploit. The NDA also tried to win the votes through a sympathy wave. Its election campaign mostly reflected this wave when it showed pamphlet about Vajpayee that what wrong did this man do? *Kay Kasoor tha Iss Aadmin Ka?* Why the government of Vajpayee was made to collapse in thirteenth months? The issue of foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi was also highlighted by the party to increase votes. The elections were, predominantly, marked by a hot controversy regarding Sonia Gandhi as a Prime ministerial candidate both within her party and outside.

ELECTION RESULTS AND OUTCOME

The electoral outcome in 1999, manifest a continuity as well as a departure from the political patterns established in 1998. The continuity lays in the coming to power again of a right-centrist coalition led by the BJP. The departure was that for the first time in the decade, a coalition government was voted to power that was no longer dependent on support from *outside*. All the coalition partners joined the cabinet, except TDP

¹³⁸ Election Commission of India, Press Release during the Pendency of the poll, Indian Recorder, 1999, p. 4554.

¹³⁹ Indian Recorder, 10-16 September, 1999, p.4792.

whose representative, G.M.C. Balayogi, became the speaker of the Lok Sabha. This was, thus, not a minority government reliant on on parliamentary support of parties that were half inside and half outside the coalition. This was, indeed, the factor that had brought down all the previous coalition governments in the decade. With this vital destabilizing factor out of the way, the NDA government could look to the future with a greater degree of confidence. Yet, for the leading party in the coalition there was not much to delight about. For, even though the BJP overlooked over other allies, its parliamentary seats registered an increase of only two seats i.e.182 seats against 180 in the previous Lok Sabha. Its vote share percentage declined from 25.47 to 23.75. However, its main opponent, the Congress, suffered a major decline in its number of seats from 141 to 114 even though its vote stood at 28.30 per cent, that is, 4.55 per cent higher than that of the BJP. The Congress increased its vote percentage from 25.88 to 28.30.

While comparing the electoral performance of the two largest single parties leading the two major coalitional blocs, it was observed that the congress captured over 30 per cent votes in 16 states and six union territories. In terms of its parliamentary seat share, it was on or above the 40 per cent mark in seven states and four union territories. The BJP crossed the 30 percent mark in terms of vote share in six states and four union territories. In terms of seat share, it won over 40 per cent mark in eight states and two union territories. None of the other national parties captured even six per cent of the national votes or seven percent of the parliamentary seats. The best performance among these minor national parties was that of the CPI (M) with 5.4 per cent of votes and 6.1 per cent of seats nationally.

Among the major regional parties, counting the largest ones in their respective states, it got nine state parties with their seats shares in their respective states ranging between 69 per cent TDP in Andhra Pradesh and 13 per cent RJD in Bihar. Their respective vote shares in the limited arenas of their states ranged between 39.9 per cent TDP and 16.9 per cent Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.

The BJP and its Alliances

For the BJP, the idea of being the biggest and the most influential partner in the NDA was a better bet than single handedly contesting the elections with slighter chances of winning and forming the government. Though the reasons for entering into such an alliance were many such as incentives of power sharing, common issues, ideological

similarly in the case of BJP-Shiv Sena alliance, etc., yet the binding thread appeared to be anti-Congressism.

In the southern region, the BJP, with its allies, won 74 out of the 130 seats, which was an incredible enhancement over the 50 seats captured in 1998. If one excludes Kerala, where the BJP was not a major force, then the party and its allies captured as much as 71 out of 110 seats.

In Andhra Pradesh, the BJP-TDP alliance proved to be equally advantageous for both. In a state where politics moved around the competition between the TDP and the Congress, the BJP benefitted in the absence of an anti-incumbency mood against Chandrababu Naidu and won 7 seats as against 4 in 1998 general elections. Naidu, on the other hand, enmeshed Vajpayee's notable national ratings and romped home with a remarkable tally of 29 seats in Lok Sabha elections as against 12 in 1998 and won 180 of the total 293 assembly seats.

In Karnataka, in 1998 general elections an alliance with R.K. Hegde's Lok Shakti and the anti-incumbency vote against the Janata Dal government of J.H. Patel brought rich dividends to the BJP. The Lok Shakti-BJP alliance won 16 of the 28 seats with Lok Shakti 3 and BJP 13.

But in the early days of campaigning for 1999 Lok Sabha Elections, the strategy of Hegde to rope in his all-time friend J.H. Patel thus forming Janata Dal (United)-comprising Patel's faction and Hegde's Lok Shakti-shocked and agitated the local state BJP workers as well as the national leaders. The result was a disaster for the BJP-JD (U) alliance in Karnataka with the BJP secured just 7 seats. Some of the more important reasons for this disaster were: anti-incumbency vote against J.H. Patel, factionalism in the party, misunderstanding regarding seat sharing result of a last minute decision to form an alliance unlike in 1998 and pro-Lingayat posture of Patel and B.S. Yediyurappa.

In Tamil Nadu, in 1998 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP-AIADMK alliance seized 30 of the total 39 seats out of which the BJP had just 3 seats as against none in 1996 general elections. The AIADMK's role in destabilising the 1998 BJP-led government compelled the BJP to enter into a difficult alliance with AIADMK's political rival in the state—the DMK. The alliance with DMK a party which was not only very much critical of the BJP's various moves during NDA's 13 months term but was still voicing its anger till the date of confidence vote in 1999 improved BJP's tally from 3 to 4 but reduced the alliance tally to 25 from previous year's 30.

In Punjab the BJP-SAD alliance could win only 3 seats out of a total of 13. The main reasons for such a debacle were an agitated mood against the Badal Government, split in the Akali Dal which led to the creation of All India Shiromani Akali Dal (AISD) under the leadership of former Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) President Gurucharan Singh Tohra, a substantial shift of the Dalit votes from the BSP to the Congress and comparatively poor selection of candidates by Akali Dal and BJP. Haryana perceived a vertical caste polarisation between the Jats and non-jats. A state mostly characterised by feudal politics was clean swepted by the BJP-INLD combine. The victory in Kargil war was the trump card which landed them safely gaining all the 10 parliamentary seats. The main reason for this remarkable performance was that apart from being a largely agrarian state, major source of employment in Haryana was the armed forces.

Table: 18, Electoral Performance of the BJP, 1999 Parliamentary Election

Sr. No.	STATE/UT	Seats			Votes Polled (%)
		Total	Contested	Won	
1	ANDHRA PRADESH	42	8	7	9.9
2	ARUNACHAL PRADESH	2	1	0	16.3
3	ASSAM	14	12	2	29.84
4	BIHAR	54	29	23	23.01
5	GOA	2	2	2	51.49
6	GUJARAT	26	26	20	52.48
7	HARYANA	10	5	5	29.21
8	HIMACHAL PRADESH	4	3	3	46.27
9	JAMMU & KASHMIR	6	6	2	31.56
10	KARNATAKA	28	19	7	27.19
11	KERALA	20	14	0	6.56
12	MADHYA PRADESH	40	40	29	46.58
13	MAHARASHTRA	48	26	13	21.18
14	MANIPUR	2	1	0	1.02
15	MEGHALAYA	2	2	0	9.45
16	MIZORAM	1	-	-	-
17	NAGALAND	1	1	0	5.12
18	ORISSA	21	9	9	24.63
19	PUNJAB	13	3	1	9.16
20	RAJASTHAN	25	24	16	47.23
21	SIKKIM	1	-	-	-
22	TAMIL NADU	39	6	4	7.14
23	TRIPURA	2	1	0	12.82
24	UTTAR PRADESH	85	77	29	27.64
25	WEST BENGAL	42	13	2	11.13
26	ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS	1	1	1	52.74
27	CHANDIGARH	1	1	0	45.07

28	DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI	1	1	0	20.83
29	DAMAN & DIU	1	1	0	43.13
30	DELHI	7	7	7	51.75
31	PONDICHERRY	1	-	-	-
	TOTAL	543	339	182	23.75%

Source: STATISTICAL REPORT ON GENERAL ELECTIONS, 1999 TO THE THIRTEENTH LOK SABHA, VOLUME I Election Commission of India.

In Maharashtra, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance was the only one which had performed well despite their vigorous differences on Hindutva and nationalism. The triangular contest between the five-party Progressive Democratic Front comprising Nationalist Congress Party, two factions of RPI, Swatantra Bharat Paksh, Samajwadi Party and Janata Dal – Secular, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance and the Congress not only divided the Congress votes, mostly in southern Maharashtra, but also made it difficult for the party to field good candidates, thus making it easy for the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance to secure 28 of the 48 Lok Sabha seats.

The fact that the BJP got 50 seats as against 75 of the Congress in a 288 seat state assembly elections and 12 seats as against 11 of the Congress out of 48 Lok Sabha seats indicates that people voted for the NDA in national elections while they rejected the same alliance, i.e., the BJP-Shiv Sena, in the state assembly elections.¹⁴⁰

West Bengal observed a triangular contest between three main formations- the CPI (M)-led ruling left front, the TMC-BJP combine and the Congress. With the only aim of cutting into Congress' vote share, Sharad Pawar's NCP also fielded six candidates though it didn't expect to win any seat. TMC's leader Mamta Banerjee made an unreadable move by staying out of the BJP- led NDA and also avoided joint campaign with the BJP but had a seat-sharing arrangement with the BJP as the party left 3 out of 42 seats for the BJP and contested the remaining 39 all alone. She desired to join the ministry in case the BJP comes to power¹⁴¹ and had consistently voiced her opinion in favour of the BJP. The manifesto of the TMC did not seek to bring in legislation that will ensure a full term for a government as suggested by other NDA partners and was silent on Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin which showed that the so-called unconditional support to the government had some hidden objective. The NDA succeeded to increase

¹⁴⁰ Frontline, August 13 1999, p. 44.

¹⁴¹ Outlook, 6 September, 1999, p.19.

the tally of 1998 to Lok Sabha seats in 1999. Though the BJP-TMC combine succeeded in making a dent in some communist dominated areas of West Bengal yet the rural West Bengal still remained detached and almost out of the reach of anti-left forces.

In Bihar the entire Hindi speaking belt (still) was believed to be a stronghold of the BJP. In this election the party managed to carve in roads in areas, which were the traditional vote banks of Yadavs and Jats, by managing seat sharing arrangements with state level political parties. In Bihar, BJP's alliance partner Samata party was ideologically different but the common anti-Laloo feelings had helped the two to come together.

Nitish Kumar has said 'I am the biggest opponent of the BJP but in Bihar they are the strongest anti-Laloo force. So enemy's enemy is a friend. If today I decide to wear a garb of ideology then Laloo says there is no communal-secular divide in Bihar. It is only Laloo versus anti-Laloo'¹⁴²

The anti-incumbency mood, various allegations against Laloo Yadav, erosion of the traditional support base of dalits, and also the arithmetic of the alliance helped the BJP-JD (U) combine to increase their tally up to 40 from 30 in 1998 elections.

The state of Orissa which, until two elections ago, was not even familiar with saffron power witnessed an extraordinary victory of the BJP-BJD combine as they won 19 out of 21 parliamentary seats. The BJP's emergence as a third force in Orissa was the result of its response to the regional sensitivity in Orissa. The traditional socio-economic divide between the region was again politically relevant which the BJP expected to exploit³⁸. Thus the BJP-BJD alliance gained acceptance not only as a role only viable alternative but also as a combined force to counter the misrule of the Congress in the state. Kargil War, Vajpayee's rating as the prime minister, and the issue of tribal conversions in north Orissa also contributed to the victory for the saffron alliance.

The north eastern states had either been the stronghold of the Congress or the split groups of the Congress, viz., Arunachal Congress and Manipur State Congress. Realising the need to enter into politics of the north-east, the BJP, in the election campaign, worried their stand against insurgency, infiltration and separatism. They even tried to enter into an alliance with parties like Assom Gana Parishad (AGP) and Tripura Upajati Sangh (TUJS). But they could not make any considerable gain and were able to increase only one seat in 1998 to 2 in 1999 elections.

¹⁴² Nitish Kumar's interview in the Frontline, 23 November, 1995.

To sum up, in southern region, the NDA won 74 out of 130 seats, a tremendous improvement over the 50 seats in 1998. In north, the NDA got 13 seats out of 23 seats with its alliance with SAD (B) and INLD. In west, it got 28 out of 48 seats in Maharashtra due to the defections in Congress party and the issue of Sonia's foreign origin. In eastern states the NDA won 69 seats out of 107, whereas West Bengal witnessed a triangular contest between three major formations-the CPI (M) led ruling front, TMC-BJP combine and Congress. In Bihar, the entire Hindi speaking belt is believed to be a stronghold of BJP. The BJP's emergence as a third force in Orissa was the result of its response to the regional sensitivity in Orissa. Hence, NDA got a tremendous victory by exploiting its election issues successfully.

BJP-Led NDA Government Participation and Portfolio Allocation

The BJP-led NDA Government distributed ministerial portfolios at the time of government formation. The leading position of the BJP in the Lok Sabha after the 1998 and 1999 elections, both as the biggest party and because of its electoral alliances with most of the parties which supported it, meant that it was able to control the distribution of ministerial posts. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was presented as the Prime Ministerial candidate in both campaigns, and held the post from 1998 until the NDA's electoral setback in 2004. As Prime Minister, Vajpayee was in charge of distributing portfolios between the BJP and supporting parties.

Allocation of power between the members of a coalition government had important consequences both for the cohesiveness of the government and the policy direction it adopted. Two rival models of portfolio allocation had been developed, one which proposed that government offices would be distributed respectively among coalition partners¹⁴³ and other, which anticipated that the distribution would replicate the bargaining power of each of the partners. Further deliberation could be given to the nature of specific portfolios; their relative importance and relation to specific policy areas.

The situation became complex by the disposition of some parties such as the TDP to support the NDA government, but refusal in accepting office. Other parties, such as the Lok Dal shared this watchfulness, whereas leaders such as Mamata Banerjee wavered

¹⁴³ Bueno De Mesquita, Strategy, Risk and Personality in Coalition Politics: The Case of India, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 26.

between accepting office and remaining apart over the course of the parliament. For the TDP, refusal of government office was partly offset by the selection of one of its party members (G.M.C. Balayogi) as Speaker of the Lok Sabha¹⁴⁴ In the initial allocation of portfolios, following the 1998 elections, 22 Cabinet ministers were selected with 21 Ministers of State.

Out of the cabinet posts half were occupied by members of the BJP, well under their fraction of the Lok Sabha representation of the NDA. In the Council of Ministers, this discrepancy was slightly rectified, with 14 out of the 21 Ministers outside the Cabinet being from the BJP. The allocation of cabinet and ministerial posts was approximately in accordance to the size of the membership of the governing coalition, the picture was somewhat distorted because the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) leader, Jayalalitha, negotiated on behalf of the group of parties (including the PMK, MDMK, TRC and JP) elected from Tamil Nadu.

Important ministries in the government, especially the Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Finance, were controlled by the members of the BJP.¹⁴⁵ Other ministerial appointments could be seen to have fitted the particular interests of the particular parties within the coalition. The BJP retained control of the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, portfolios which were central to the party's concern with the promotion of a cultural agenda in line with the Hindutva ideology. Alliance partners were allocated portfolios which tied in with the interests of the parties or states which they represented. Jayalalitha was facing legal allegations of corruption and her concern was served by the appointment of Thambi Durai, a prominent AIADMK leader, to the Law, Justice and Company Affairs portfolio. Naveen Patnaik's control of the Ministries of Mines and Steel reflected the particular interests of Orissa politics.

As party became balanced in 1998, the Prime Minister had to consider other aspects of regional, communal and political balance. The distribution of ministries reflected the general distribution of the coalition across the country, Tamil Nadu and Bihar were over-represented because of the importance of the AIADMK and Samata Party to the coalition and West Bengal and Haryana were not represented because of the Trinamul Congress and Lok Dal's decision to support the Government from outside. The BJP

¹⁴⁴ Katharine Adeney and Lawrence, Saez, (ed.) *Coalition Politics and Hindu Nationalism*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p.24.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

claimed to have given sufficient representation to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and appointed some non-Hindu Ministers.

In 1998 and 1999 the Government representation of coalition partners inclined to be balanced with the appointment of BJP members from matching states; and Cabinet members from alliance parties were always accompanied by a Minister of State from the BJP. This meant that even when the BJP was a subordinate partner in a state alliance, it could often claim that the state had one BJP Minister, and ensure that coalition partners were not able to dominate any one area of policy.

In 1999 the BJP was in a solid position, and this was echoed in a greater share of government portfolios. The Janata Dal (U)/Samata combine was over-represented in the 1999 NDA Cabinet as a consequence of the incorporation of Sharad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan into the NDA coalition. The 1999 Council of Ministers was much larger than that of 1998, with 69 Ministers appointed, compared to 43 in 1998. The size of the Government continued to grow; by 2002 the Cabinet had grown to 32 Ministers, and the Council of Ministers to 77.

Working and Achievements of National Democratic Alliance

National Democratic Alliance was first formed in 1998 and again came to power in 1999 under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The NDA was an alliance of various national and regional political parties led by the BJP. The NDA assured to end political instability created between 1996, 1998 and 1999 elections. Its common manifesto in the 1999 elections was an agenda for a proud and prosperous India.

The NDA Government was the first national coalition government in India to complete a full, five year term in office. The ability of the 24 party NDA to govern the whole term is one of the most extraordinary contemporary events in the history of post-independence politics in India. In the 1999 NDA government came in Centre with its alliance and worked upto 13 May, 2004.

The NDA was not reliant on outside support of any political party to carry out its programme. It was at the mercy of smaller allies within the coalition and hence, its internal coordination mechanism had to be strong. The alliance put in place the most widespread and elaborates mechanism to coordinate between partners within and outside the government. The NDA had a two dimensional coordination device, which was not limited simply to the political domain alone but also included inter-ministerial

collaboration. In the political domain, it formed the National Agenda for Governance (NAG) and the Coordination Committee (CC) moreover this, the alliance began to use broadly the all-party meetings and Chief Minister's conferences for discussion. At the governmental level it used the device of Group of Ministers (GOM) not only for administrative motives and formulation of policy matters but also to resolve the issues of political significance. The working of NDA coalition can be studied under two main heads maintenance of coalition and breakdown of coalition's government. Maintenance of coalition has been labelled at four points (1) National agenda for governance (2) Coordination committee (3) All party meetings (4) Government level-group of ministers.

The National Agenda for Governance (NAG) like the Common Minimum Programmes (CMP) of the UF made the first base on which the alliance revolved. The NAG echoed a commitment from the key alliance partner, the BJP obeyed to a moderate agenda not confirming to religious programmes only. This commitment aloof the untouchability label that the BJP carried, and allowed the allies to join hands with the party to form the alliance. Thus the NAG continued to be a significant part of daily political discourse and vital torchbearer for the alliance. At the second level, the NDA had a Coordination Committee (CC). Unlike the Steering Committee of the UF, the CC met more regularly and frequently. Considering the fact that the smaller parties held the key to the stability of the alliance, the CC played a key role in the maintenance of the alliance. The CC made it a point to meet before each parliamentary session to make sure floor coordination among the allies. The institution of all-party meetings brought together all political parties on a common platform. The all-party meeting route was used by government to prompt the opinion or make some elucidations to political parties on some legislation or projected legislative measures, and to discuss matters of national and international importance among other things. The benefit of this mechanism was that it gave the government a sounding board and most notably allowed discussion to take place in a relaxed and informal way as compared to parliament or any other such formal setting. This permitted parties to spontaneously express their opinion and reach compromises, which was not possible in parliament, where winning and losing, are recorded and publicized.

The NDA coordination machinery was not limited to political level only but also took place at the governmental level. The NDA federal coalition began to make use of inter-ministerial groups, which like the all-party mechanism, helped multiple purposes. The

GoM's helped the purpose of coordination within a coalition ministry, it facilitated to minimise differences of opinion and conflicts within the cabinet. It also facilitated in making important policy decisions and selection other policy and programme recommendations. This device was also used for the purpose of looking into matters of concern to different allies of the coalition. These groups popularly called Group of Ministers (GoM) usually composed of three to four members of the union cabinet. Thus coalitions grown newer and stronger mechanisms of coordination.

Though there is no single cause that has led to the breakdown of federal coalitions, there were many factors accountable. Competition at the state level the key reason for the breakdown of an alliance. Another reason for the breakdown of alliances could be outlined to the absence of an appropriate institutionalized consultation mechanism within the coalition. The game of power sharing was also accountable for breakdown of coalition. In the Indian system, this process of power sharing is largely done by the allocation of portfolios such as that of Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, Deputy Ministers; arrangement of important positions of authority, Constitutional posts of Governors, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Legislative posts such as headship and membership of parliamentary committees, consultative joint committees and others where nominations made by the Prime Minister. A weak organisational structure of the core party within the alliance was also a basis of breakdown of coalition. But the NDA handled competently with all these blockades responsible for breakdown of the coalition and provided a good performance during its tenure.

Moreover all pulls and pressures, the NDA did well in the areas of contentious legislations and reforms. It passed many Acts and Bills like Insurance Regulatory Development Authority Bill and Securities Laws (Amendment) Bill. Numerous legislations in conformity with government's policy of globalization and economic liberalization were also passed, for example, Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), Trade Marks Act, Copyright Amendment Act, etc. The government effectively introduced Information Technology Bill, 1999 to deliver legal recognition for e-commerce. Many inventive schemes were introduced by the government in areas like tourism, civil aviation, agriculture, law and justice, information and broadcasting, railways, power, surface transport and human resource development. Though, the government was frequently stunned by the controversies created by the hidden agenda of the BJP or the alliance partners as they sought to retain their position in the government and were to satisfy the home constituencies as well.

It competently managed to elect A.P.J. Kalam for the office of the President of India as a consensus candidate of the NDA and Congress which replicated the collective asset of the NDA allies. The office of the Vice President also went to Bharion Singh Shekhawat supported by the NDA. It also validated its strength by making reforms. It successfully made three new states-Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttranchal.

Thus NDA made admirable achievements to its credit in the arenas of Production and Development. In the domain of Production and Development number of achievements were made a note in the sectors of agriculture, industry, petroleum and natural gas, power, science and technology, steel, and water resources. Various welfare schemes were also started. In the fields of social justice and employment, tribal affairs, urban development and poverty alleviation, the achievements were up to the mark during the tenure of NDA.

The greatest political jolt to face the NDA was the Gujarat pogrom of 2002. The disaster of the BJP Government in Gujarat and the leadership in New Delhi to take decisive action against rioters can be seen to have been a major factor in the growth of communal violence in that state. This was a clear violation of the manifesto commitment of the NDA, yet there was only muted protest from the coalition partners of the BJP. While the TDP leader, Chandrababu Naidu, called for the elimination of the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, and Mamata Banerjee boycotted a meeting of the NDA Co-ordination Committee, there was only one resignation from government over the issue (Ram Vilas Paswan (JD (U))). A censure motion in the Lok Sabha on the Government's handling of the Gujarat massacres was easily defeated (276 votes to 182), even though the abstaining of the TDP. The explanation seems to be grounded in perceptions of the electoral impact at the state level. First, in Gujarat the BJP fought against the Congress on its own, and so the Gujarat riots did not recast the nature of party competition. Second, the electoral character of the events was uncertain, and there looked to be no substantial repercussion against the BJP. Indeed, the state assembly elections that followed the massacres saw the BJP government returned to power in Gujarat, and the 2004 national elections saw little evidence that the events led to a national vote swing against the BJP.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ A. Datar, (2004) 'A vote for secular politics', The Hindu, 20 May: AE-2.

The BJP-led coalition governments (1998-2004) deliberately accepted at the outset the following cost-reduction strategies to make sure its durability:

1. Constructing and fighting the election on a common agenda: The BJP in 1999 did not issue its own manifesto and decided to contest the election on an agreed upon common agenda. A common agenda usually operates on the principle that its broadness will attract the voters and be flexible enough to be acceptable to every member of the coalition subjugating various positions on the left-right spectrum.

2. Choosing more parties than essential to build the coalition: The 1999 coalition consists of 24 parties and can truly be regarded as a surplus coalition.

3. Over-sized government: While the 1998 government comprised marginally more than 40 members, the 1999 coalition started with 70 ministers. Had it been a single-party government this would have been much too large but the requirements of the coalition make this unavoidable. Its configuration was clearly calculated on the basis of satisfying regional, caste, communal and gender interests.¹⁴⁷

4. Coming up with a formula for determining the number of cabinet slots built on the parliamentary strength of the coalition partners made the distribution of the portfolios a transparent and equitable affair. It was decided that one Cabinet slot will be given for a party with six MPs and additional numbers were accustomed by offering other positions like Ministers of State.¹⁴⁸

5. Appeasing certain sectional interests by redeeming the electoral pledges made to them was also a sensible strategy. This was deceptive in the Vajpayee government's decision in its very first Cabinet meeting approving "the list of 116 castes/sub-castes from 17 States/Union Territories for inclusion in the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) list making them eligible for benefit of 27% reservation in Central government jobs".¹⁴⁹ The extension of reservation to the Jat community of Rajasthan and Delhi under the OBC category by the NDA government must be seen in the light of the assurance that the Congress had made to the community and had failed to honour it. Appeasing the interest of special groups was a good strategy to keep the constituent parties happy but the danger in this is that governments become "responsive without being responsible" since they only please some sections for purposes of keeping themselves in power.

¹⁴⁷ The Hindu, 23 October, 1999.

¹⁴⁸ India Today, 25 October 1999, p. 21.

¹⁴⁹ The Hindu, 22 October 1999.

6. This government had also been making various suggestions to amend the Constitution to reduce governmental instability. The BJP leaders had been arguing for a German type of law which specifies that an acceptable alternative government must be projected before pulling down the existing one. The other projected change relates to a fixed-term parliament. The NDA manifesto specially proposed the replacement of no-confidence motion “with the German system of a constructive vote of non-confidence” and “a fixed term (five years) for all elected bodies including legislatures”.¹⁵⁰ Both these proposals were broadly criticised by the opposition parties as well as by the media as devices intended by the present government to prolong itself in office. The NDA government nonetheless, went ahead with the creation of an 11-member Constitutional Review Commission to review the Constitution following the Prime Minister’s announcement that a review was reasonable for reasons of political stability and country’s development.¹⁵¹

Together these measures proved that the BJP and its allies acknowledged the inevitability of coalitions and were keen to make provisions for ensuring the stability of such governments. Settling itself to coalition politics was a major adjustment for the BJP since it is considered as anti-consociational and less devoted to power-sharing. But it appears to have shed these inhibitions while the more natural party to adjust to coalitions, namely the Congress had found it difficult to accept them specifically at a time when coalitions had become an essential part of Indian politics.¹⁵²

Those who despair about the number of political parties and the fragmentation of the Indian political system can take heart in the fact that India is slowly moving towards an emerging two-party system. One of the cited generalisations in comparative politics namely, Duverger’s Law commands that the first-past-the-post electoral system leads to a two-party system and India in this respect was supposed to be an anomaly.¹⁵³ But a closer look at the Indian experience suggests that at least at the state or regional level there has emerged a definite tendency towards a two-party system¹⁵⁴ with a regional party forming one pole and Congress/BJP forming another pole. In some circumstances we have two regional parties alternating in power such as in Tamil Nadu. At the Centre

¹⁵⁰ The NDA Manifesto, 1999.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² The Hindu, 25 October 1999.

¹⁵³ Brian J. Gaines, “Duverger’s Law and the Meaning of Exceptionalism,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 32, No.7 (October 1999), pp. 835-61 for a different perspective on the Canadian experience.

¹⁵⁴ E. Sridharan, “Duvergiers Law, Its Reformulations and the Evolution of the Indian Party System,” (New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research, 1997), p. 11-13.

too, one can see the existence of this structure except that it is in the form of two combinations - one could term this as clustered bipolarity. With the “now-we-see, now-we-don’t” phenomenon of the Third Force, it is BJP and its allies and Congress and its allies which form the two poles. These allies, of course, are the important regional parties which have come to acquire a great deal of clout in the Indian federal system.