Accountability: the foundation of parliamentary democracy
India made a significant decision when it decided to adopt a parliamentary system of democracy. Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the constitution, explained in his last speech in the Constituent Assembly, that in adopting the parliamentary system of democracy, as opposed to the presidential form, the Constituent Assembly preferred accountability to stability. In other words, the defining feature of our system of governance is accountability. The Executive, particularly the political executive which comes from the Legislature, remains accountable to the Legislature.

Crisis of accountability
However, it has been observed that the culture of accountability is eroding. It can be said that there is a crisis of accountability confronting the system of parliamentary democracy across the world. In the recent past, some reports of the Comptroller and Auditor-General (CAG) of India threw light on the decisions taken by some of the Ministers of the United Progressive Alliance-II coalition government. As a result, it was perceived that the culture of accountability had been compromised.

Thanks to the vision of the
framers of the constitution, we have a body like CAG which so effectively acts as the watchdog of parliamentary democracy.

So important is role of the CAG, that Dr Ambedkar even stated in the Constituent Assembly that it is the most important institution in India’s constitutional framework.

India: A coalition society
In India the culture of coalition politics and government is a somewhat relatively new concept. In a society which is a coalition of diverse religions, languages, ethnicities, political parties and regions it is only right that we have a culture of coalition politics and government.

To have a coalition government is quite natural and usual in the Indian setting. In the Rajya Sabha, the second chamber of the Indian Parliament, there are representatives of 27 parties.

In the Lok Sabha we find representation of more than 30 political parties.

The existence of so many parties at the national and regional levels and election of their representatives to the Legislatures of our country make India a natural choice for a coalition government.

Coalition government and the United Kingdom
Even in a country like the United Kingdom, where there are only two or three main parties, there is a coalition government. A study of British politics shows that coalition governments only existed during wartime or other emergencies such as economic crises. It was British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli who said that “England does not love coalitions”, and evidently he was right, given that the first formation of a coalition government only took place in 1974 as a result of a hung Parliament. The second coalition
government was formed in Britain in 2010 as no political party received a clear majority. It is anticipated that the governments in the U.K. will increasingly be coalitions. Professor Vernon Bogdanor in his book *The Coalition and the Constitution* published in 2011 after the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Rt Hon. David Cameron, MP, came into power, observed that: "The coalition, moreover, may well not be an aberration. There are signs that, with the rise in strength of third parties, hung Parliaments are more likely to recur than in the past. Perhaps, therefore, the era of a single party majority government, to which we have become accustomed since 1945, is coming to an end." If coalition governments exist in countries with only two or three parties, it is inevitable they will exist in a country like India with multiple parties.

The formation of a coalition government does not equate to the culture of accountability suffering as a result. It is guided by what is called the doctrine of the supremacy of the coalition agreement. Mr Cameron, answering a reader's question in *The Independent* newspaper days before the 2010 elections said: "the point about a hung Parliament is that the decisions that really matter to people are taken behind closed doors. Instead of people choosing the government, the politicians do. Instead of policies implemented on the basis of a manifesto there will be compromises and half measures."

**Not compromising basic values**

It should be stressed that coalition politics need not be a negation of accountability, or a negation of stability and good governance. Rather we have seen that coalition politics helped India defend and safeguard certain basic principles which are at the heart of its governance. The principle of secularism for example, is enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution and is one of the building blocks of our nation. The Janata Government of 1977 – the first coalition government at the national level – collapsed, according to some analysis, on account of departure from secularism when some Ministers of the coalition government refused to detach themselves from the Hindu nationalist group, Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS). Given that some members of the government compromised on secularism, the government fell. However, looking at the example of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government under former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, it only survived when issues such as the abolition of special status to Kashmir and the Uniform Civil Code were abandoned by the dominant party of the coalition.

Basic principles which are inviolable cannot be compromised. If compromised, a government cannot survive. When the NDA Government departed from the principles of secularism when riots took place in Gujarat in 2002 they lost the minority votes in the 2004 General Election. Some of the constituent parties of the NDA voiced that due to the Gujarat riots in 2002 they lost the faith of their minority groups in their respective programmes and policies. Similarly it has been said that the crisis facing the UPA-2 Government has arisen given the departure from the basic principles of probity and integrity. The coalition compulsion does not mean compromising basic principles. When basic principles are compromised then the crisis confronts not only the government but also the nation. The lesson, therefore, is that we cannot afford to lose sight of the certain fundamentals which are at the root of the system.

**Better scrutiny: better government**

Due to the neglect of the culture of accountability by compromising
certain basic principles, the opposition, the CAG and even the larger civil society has come forward in upholding it.

Even in a country like the U.K. there is serious reflection that the culture of accountability has suffered a decline. This is the reason why one of the reports of the House of Commons on the issue of modernization of the Parliament appropriately observed that “better scrutiny leads to better government”. In fact accountability can be taken forward if there is better scrutiny of the policies of the government. If Parliament does not function then better scrutiny of government policies cannot be carried out. The number of days Parliament sits is not adequate. On several occasions the Conference of Presiding Officers in India has passed resolutions for increasing the days of sittings of Legislatures in India. The majority of the time of the Parliament is taken up by the government, meaning the number of days when Parliament sits has to be increased to ensure better scrutiny of government policies.

The late President of India Shri K.R. Narayanan, while inaugurating the new Legislature complex of Kerala in 1998, invoked the words of Shri Achutha Menon. Shri Menon led one of the successful coalition governments in 1967, the year in which the era of one-party dominance came to an end in Indian politics. Shri Menon said that there should be a common minimum programme and code of conduct for Ministers, to secure the successful running of coalition governments. In addition, he added that the Chief Minister should consult the coalition partners to change Ministers and their portfolios. Shri Narayanan referring to Shri Menon’s comments said that coalition politics could also provide stability of government and promote good governance. What was done in Kerala could be followed in other parts of India and even at the national level.

**Fixed term Parliament**

In the U.K., measures have been taken to strengthen the culture of accountability after the coalition government gained power in 2010. The term of the Parliament has been fixed by an Act of Parliament, which means that the Parliament cannot be dissolved before completion of its term except when a no confidence motion is passed by the House of Commons; no other party is in a position to form a government, and when the two-thirds of the Members of the House of Commons pass a resolution to dissolve the House. In doing so the prerogative of the head of the government to dissolve the Parliament at his or her own free will has been taken away. Such a bold measure would ensure stability of the government and thereby promote the cause of accountability.

**Definition of compromise**

The issue of compromise is at the heart of coalition politics and democracy. Without compromise we cannot have a coalition government. The whole architecture of politics is based on compromise, but what does this mean?

One shining explanation on compromise came from Mahatma Gandhi who non-violently fought for what he called “parliamentary swaraj” (independence). While fighting for the rights of Indians in South Africa, he talked of compromising with the British authorities who assured that the certain law restricting the rights of Indians would be repealed and in turn Indians would have to give fingerprints.

Gandhi, who opposed giving fingerprints on the ground that only fingerprints were taken from criminals, eventually agreed. Many Indians disagreed with him and were furious with his decision. Gandhi explained that compromise equaled giving concessions and not compromising principles. He explained that he did not compromise on his demand for abolition of the law restricting the rights of Indians. However, since the British were assured to repeal the law, he advocated letting the Indians give the concession by giving their fingerprints. We must be mindful of the definition of compromise Gandhi offered more than 100 years ago.

The sum and substance is that the basic principles of parliamentary democracy cannot be compromised by any government which includes the coalition government. Only by ensuring this can we safeguard the culture of accountability and promote better scrutiny which in turn will promote good governance.