

Focus 69 - Indian National Congress: What can save the political future of the grand old party

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Abstract

This paper analyses the political future of the Indian National Congress (INC). The abysmal performance in elections at various levels shows that the INC, the grand old party, is losing its grip among the masses. Even in the ideological and organizational context the INC is facing problems in some form or other. Recently a group of 23 dissenting leaders wrote a letter to interim president Sonia Gandhi and questioning the party's functioning. We aim to analyse, compare and discuss the Congress' crucial ideological stands and shifts, as well as the main defects in its electoral strategies for the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and 2019. Although the Congress has managed to win elections in some states, this study suggests that affirmative actions need to be taken so as to reform the party's organizational functioning and improve its electoral performance. Our conclusion is that the Congress needs to revisit its foundational principles and rich political history so as to reconnect with the electorate.

Keywords

Indian National Congress, Political Ideology, Electoral strategy, National Movement, Organizational functioning

Introduction

Ideology is the locomotive of any political movement. It is an action-oriented system of thought, with both theoretical and practical dimensions. Ideology plays a prominent role in setting both short-term goals and long-term agendas for political action. Andrew Heywood, a political scientist, explains the practical importance of political ideologies (Heywood, 2017) as follows: ‘In effect, ideology gives people a reason to believe in something larger than themselves because people’s personal narratives only make sense when they are situated within a broader historical narrative. A post-ideological age would be therefore be an age without hope, without vision... For this, if for no other reason, political ideology is destined to be a continuing and unending process.’

Daniel Bell, American sociologist and professor at Harvard University, prophesied the denouement of political ideologies as the grand narratives in his 1960 book ‘The End of Ideology’ (Bell, 1960). He argued that political ideology had become irrelevant among "sensible" people, and that the polities of the future would be driven by piecemeal technological accustoming to the existing political system.

Crucial ideological stands and shifts in the Congress

The Indian National Congress played a vital role both in the National Movement and the framing of the Constitution, the ideological premises of both of which were clearly influenced by this party (Guha, 2007). The Enlightenment ideals of democracy, constitutionalism, sanctity of individual liberty, gender and social equality, secularism and fraternity transcending social barriers inspired the Indian National Movement (Chakrabarty, 2002). These ideals culminated in the enactment of the Constitution (Austin, 1966).

The doyens in the early phase of the Indian National Movement were inspired by the ideals of classical liberal thinkers. However, the young leaders of the later phase, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, were more inclined towards Socialism. This group eventually crystallised into the Congress Socialist Party (Chandra, 1988). Thus, the Congress gained a syncretic ideology mingling Liberal and Socialist ideals. Such a confluence is palpable in the ideology called Social Democracy (Kumar, 1989).

Social democracy is a political, social and economic ideology that promotes economic and social interventions intended to enhance social justice within the framework of a liberal democratic polity and capitalist economy. Social democracy originated as a political ideology that advocated for an evolutionary and peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism, employing established democratic political processes that contrasted with the revolutionary approach for transition propounded by orthodox Communism (Lichtheim, 1970).

The All-India Congress Committee (hereafter AICC) session held at Avadi on 10 January 1955 declared that a socialistic pattern of society was the Congress' goal. Nehruvian Socialism became the Indian incarnation of Social Democracy. The Nehru-Mahalanobis Model of economic development was a social democratic agenda (Berger, 2010). Indira Gandhi furthered this social democratic agenda through bank nationalisation and the abolition of the Privy Purse (Ramesh, 2018).

In the pre-independence phase, the Congress also acted as a social reform movement. The Indian Social Conference founded by M.G. Ranade was the social reform cell of the Indian National Congress. The Conference met annually as a subsidiary convention of the INC (at the same venue) and focused on social reforms (Heimsath, 1964). However, after independence Congress drifted away from its social reform agenda and dwindled into power-politics. The Congress today should reclaim its character as a social movement and once more turn to the Nehruvian ideals of humanism, progress and scientific temper for inspiration. Steps must also be taken to strengthen a moribund organisational structure (Pandey, 1978).

Way back in the 1960s and 1970s, noted political scientist Rajni Kothari used to characterise the Indian political system as essentially a 'Congress System' – with 'one party' exercising its 'authoritative' hegemony. Kothari even predicted that the Congress would likely become the most organized political party in the country, with a nationwide following and considerable depth in localities. The party was expected to be in a position to control widespread local power and patronage even where it was no longer in power at the state level. Kothari argued that both before and after Independence, the Congress was successful in presenting itself as the "authoritative spokesman of the nation as well as its affirmed agent of criticism and change" (Kothari, 1970)

The reasons for the Congress' hegemony were several. The party was like a broad church that accommodated many different shades of opinion within. It had a strong presence in all states of the Union. It had been led by towering personalities — Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, Patel — men of charisma and character who decisively shaped the country's political discourse. The Congress' imprint was so substantial that even its rivals had to work within the ideological parameters set by this party and its leaders. Thus, most parties who opposed the Congress still upheld welfarism, religious pluralism, and non-alignment in foreign policy (Kohli, 1990).

Kothari was writing in the aftermath of the 1967 elections, when the Congress's countrywide dominance was seriously threatened for the first time. The party retained power at the Centre, but lost in as many as eight states. Yet, as Kothari demonstrated, it remained 'the preponderant political force in the country'.

Kothari's predictions, however, were not to materialise, as Indira Gandhi took the party to a different style of functioning – in developments that eventually resulted in a long period of crisis and decay (Kothari, 1970). Scholars even considered the transition of the Indian democracy since 1975 as the beginning of the end of 'Congress System.' The most devastating performance by the Congress party, both at the national and state level, came in the aftermath of the 2014 General Elections (when it secured just 44 seats in Lok Sabha), followed by setbacks in elections in different states, including in the largest states in India such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh etc (Kothari, 1970).

But the real question is whether the party should proceed with an iconic approach to politics. Charisma may be a good rallying force for some time. But as the system gets down to brass tacks, the image of one person or a rainbow coalition of a few may not hold it all together. Politics is after all the art of social management, and peoples' aspirations do matter. That's why many would emphasize the question of social policy alternatives. No country survived in the post-liberalization period without experiencing social chaos.

The first country in South Asia which undertook liberalization was Sri Lanka, way back in the 1970s (Perumal and Thandavan, 1989). The next two decades saw the country torn by ethnic conflicts. European Yugoslavia witnessed the same process of liberalization in the 1980s, and the end result was its 'balkanisation', in less than

a decade, with ethnic conflicts assuming genocidal proportions (Bertsch, 1972). This has happened in almost all countries in the Global South; in India, it has taken a communal turn – appropriated by the Sangh Parivar across the country. In places like Kashmir and in other countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, Islamism took the role of Far-Right extremism in the public sphere. It is crucial that India's Congress considers these issues from the point of view of social policy framework – and considers the dynamics that have emerged at both local and global levels. The issue of leadership is only one aspect of multi-faceted problems that the Congress has long been facing.

However, it now seems clear that, in electoral terms, the family's allure and appeal is steadily diminishing, and this for three reasons:

First, the young who make up an ever-growing share of the electorate do not remember the (very real) charisma of Nehru and Indira. Second, the young do not remember the brutal assassinations of Indira and Rajiv, either. Third, in an increasingly aspirational society, one cannot invoke the memory of one's ancestors to justify one's own pre-eminence (Padmanabhan, 2013).

There seem to have been four distinct phases in Indian political history. The 'Congress system' that Rajni Kothari personified continued till 1989. For a full four decades after Independence, the Congress was almost continuously in power, both at the Centre and in many states. The years 1989 to 1998 were a period of transition. Congress dominance weakened across India, as parties based on regional, religious, caste and class identities won elections and ran governments in state after state (Kothari, 1970).

The years 1998 to 2014 saw the emergence of a bipolar polity. This was a consequence of the rise to national prominence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (hereafter BJP). Smaller parties clustered around two poles, the Congress and the BJP. However, the BJP, a party built on an ideological foundation of Hindu nationalism, by contrast with the Congress, has continuously reshaped its ideological agendas with full force. The Triple Talaq, 370, Ram Mandir have been achieved; the Uniform Civil Court, the Anti Conversion Bill, and many more, are in loop. Unfortunately, the BJP's Hindutva agenda has become more acceptable in mainstream discourse at a time when secular nationalism has been widely

discredited (Needham and Rajan, 2007). In such circumstances Congress is swinging like a pendulum between left and right approaches. Many times, the Congress has gravitated toward more pro-Hindu positions; sometimes it has tended towards the radical left. While posing towards soft Hindutva, the main reluctance by the Congress party related to a fear of being seen as a Muslim party; for its willingness to reclaim the mantle of secular nationalism, it acts as the radical left. Both positions harm the Congress' credibility and raise the question on its own identity – for people don't want to see themselves as just coping with left or right-wing approaches.

The main defects in the Congress' electoral strategy for the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and 2019?

Narendra Modi, India's Hindu nationalist prime minister, defied expectations when he won his second election in an even bigger landslide than the first one. He did so at the expense of India's Congress party, which campaigned on a secular and pluralist platform.

Turns out that the nationalist message of Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is hugely popular with voters. It was a massive defeat—the second in a row—for India's more liberal Congress party.

Politics in India have traditionally centred on the economy. This time, however, Modi and the BJP's support of Hindu nationalism took a more prominent position than it had in past campaigns, exploiting tensions with Pakistan to redirect the debate toward national security and anti-Muslim sectarianism. As Modi's message grew stronger, the Congress failed to truly fight for India's long-established secular ideals.

1. Don't make it about the candidate

Modi's leadership of the BJP is strong, and there is no separating his party or government's success and work from his own persona. His party heavily capitalized on this, turning the election into a referendum on him personally—rather than his government's record. Polarizing figures such as Modi tend to benefit from such politics. His party understood this. His adversaries did not.

Turning the campaign into a vote for or against Modi prevented the opposition from asserting its own ideas. Even when the Congress proposed policies that could have appealed to a broad electorate—for instance, guaranteed minimum income of Rs 72,000 (\$1,035) a year—they received little attention. As George Lakoff explained in his 2004 book, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, obsessing over a candidate's flaws only makes him or her more popular.

2. Dare to be different

The Indian election essentially pitted Modi against Gandhi. That means that on the one hand, Indians were faced with the prime minister's popular narrative of a former, indefatigable chai seller who rose to power thanks to his hard work. On the other hand, voters had the heir of a long-running political dynasty marred by corruption scandals.

Modi's myth centres on his humble roots, as well as on his common man appeal. He doesn't speak much English, for instance. Gandhi, meanwhile, studied at Harvard and Cambridge—in that sense, it just doesn't get more establishment than him (Raman, 2012).

For many voters, the Congress party is associated with old-school elitist politics, corruption, and a perceived inability to bring change to India (Rai and Kumar, 2017). Gandhi's candidacy didn't do much to change anyone's minds.

3. Make friends

Congress also failed to make strong alliances with other, smaller political parties. In Delhi, it fielded its own candidates against the BJP-opposed Aam Aadmi Party, which had won local elections there in 2018, thereby splitting the opposition vote. Competing this time with the Congress, Aam Aadmi failed to defeat the BJP, which won all of Delhi's seats. In Wayanad, Kerala, Gandhi himself took a seat from the Left Democratic Front (LDF). In West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, as well, Congress didn't side with local parties, once again splitting the non-BJP vote.

Progressives seem to repeatedly make this mistake. While conservatives often stick together (the Republican Party's support of Trump during the campaign is a textbook example), liberals often fail to find common ground.

4. Focus the narrative

Modi's narrative of a new, strong, corruption-free India—one with international power, credibility and gravitas—appealed to many voters. It delivered a clear vision of what he was promising, and one that Indians were fast to embrace. Congress never presented a clear vision of its own.

The party decried the threat to secular values posed by the BJP, and held itself up as the defender of said secular values. But rather than centring on how those values could help India succeed, the party focused more on what would happen if protections further deteriorated.

This is not unlike what happened during the 2016 election in the United States. For instance, Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" had a clear if suspect mission. Clinton's "Stronger Together" described a status, not an intention. In 2020 Democrats faced a similar problem of credibility as they did in 2016. With a strong campaign on the lines of saving democracy in America, however, democrats secured the confidence of American people under the leadership of Joe Biden. On the other hand, India's Congress Party is failed to address any of their shortcomings in the recently concluded 2019 general election. Unless central leadership forgets about the opposition, stops playing defence, and promotes its own, clear vision, there is but a slim chance for redeeming Congress.

Affirmative actions need to be taken so as to reform the Congress party's organizational functioning in order to improve its electoral performance:

The abysmal performance by the Indian National Congress in the 2019 general election has naturally raised serious questions regarding the political future of the grand old party in India. The most obvious and contentious issue, widely and rigorously discussed, is the capacity by the party's top leader, Rahul Gandhi, to revive the political fortunes of the already beleaguered principal opposition party in India. It is undeniably true that the deep-rooted, habitual sycophancy within the party regarding the unrestrained obsession with the Gandhis is appalling. Moreover, the Gandhi family's unquestioning authority over the party machinery, despite having led to miserable electoral results in two successive national elections (as

well as innumerable state elections), thwarts the two most elementary prerequisites of a healthy party system – inner party democracy and electoral accountability.

However, to attribute the Congress party's predicament as entirely attributed to the all-pervasive dominance and inefficiency of the Gandhis constitutes an inexplicable exaggeration and unfair distortion of reality. It must be urgently realized that while it is indeed time to deliver an obituary for the age-old, once glorious but presently ill-famed dynastic leadership in Congress, the mere departure of the Gandhi clan won't automatically spell the Congress' recovery. The Gandhi family's predominant position, flanked and flattered by a coterie of electorally unconnected loyalists, is a mere symptom of a more deep-rooted, structural, attitudinal, and ideological crisis that has slowly and eventually eroded the party beyond recognition in the last five decades.

Besides a leadership crisis, which is the party's most discussed shortcoming, the precipitous decline of Congress should be explained in the light of three more fundamental flaws which have facilitated its silent death since the Indira Gandhi era. First, we must consider the complete lack of effort to nurture grassroots-level organizational structures of the party, so crucial to mass mobilization. Second, we must account for the gradual shrinking of the party's social base, as ambitious but fiery mass leaders were alienated in order to retain the supremacy of the central leadership. Third, we must recognize the complete lack of any consistent or coherent idea on which the party could build the narrative of its political identity and newly attract the electorate.

1. The Organizational Revamp

The Congress' *raison d'être* seems for a few years now to revolve only around the idea of installing a Gandhi as prime minister of the country, around whom fiefdoms of regional heavyweights can thrive. It is undeniably true that an unrestrained obsession with the Gandhis is currently the only glue holding the party together. However, the Indian electorate has come a long way since the times of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and now shows little appreciation for legacy, elitism, and entitlement. Under such circumstances, with the Gandhi brand under distress, the Congress' ability to fight the structural and organizational behemoth of the RSS-

BJP combine stands severely compromised because of its short-sighted negligence of growth and development on the organizational front (Manoj, 2021).

The well-oiled organizational prowess of the RSS and its affiliate groups at the micro-level contributes a great deal to the successful mass mobilization of voters by the ruling BJP. Once-effective Congress bodies — like Seva Dal, which is the seminal grassroots front organization; the Youth Congress, which still has a membership of over 20 million; and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), which has the capacity to resonate widely — are now largely dysfunctional and highly ineffective. The grand old party, the pioneer of the largest mass mobilization in the history of India, lacks the wherewithal and seems rudderless to man its polling booths, guard its electoral citadels, mobilize resources across states, and carry the policy ideas and vision of the party to citizens across India.

2. The Art of Accommodation

Second, the party has long relinquished the Nehruvian “Congress system” of consensus and coalition-building for tactical electoral gains, resulting in a depleting of core voter constituencies. Gradually, the once diverse group of social and regional constituencies that used to find breathing space in the Congress’ rank-and-file was transferred towards regional, linguistic, and caste-based parties. Since losing Tamil Nadu to the Dravidian parties in the 1960s, or since losing the Hindi heartland to the caste-based parties and the BJP in the 1990s, the Congress has not been able to regain ground (Pandian, 2019).

To add insult to injury, the irrational need to maintain the Ghandis’ unquestioning dominance over the party restricted the rise of ambitious yet highly-skilled regional leaders – who were either cut down to size or shown the door. From the removal of strongmen such as Devaraj Urs in Karnataka and Sharad Pawar in Maharashtra, to the more recent examples of Hemant Biswa Sharma in Assam and Y. S. Jaganmohan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, the Congress has systematically alienated firebrand regional stalwarts, simply to quell the unjustified insecurity of its central leadership (Lodha, Palishkar, Kumar, 2017). As a crude irony of destiny, the Congress paid a heavy price for this gross political miscalculation as it has been rendered politically irrelevant in many states by the very leaders once ignored. This

strongly contrasts with the growth of strong regional leaders even within national parties like the BJP — Shivraj Singh Chauhan in Madhya Pradesh and Yogi in Uttar Pradesh for instance. The Congress’ aversion to the growth of mass leaders has rendered the party ineffective in key states.

3. A Convincing Counter Narrative

Lastly, the party has completely failed to churn out a distinct identity based on a coherent ideology or messaging that can effectively capture the imagination of a wide swath of people. From the party’s espousal of “soft” Hindutva so as to counter BJP’s Hindu consolidation to the occasional avowal of secularism in order to keep minorities in good humour, the party’s confused ideological narrative has further weakened its popular appeal (Khare, 2014). The Congress’ past insistence on socialistic leanings, secularism, and progressive policies has come to be replaced by an ideological void. Its emulation of the BJP and use of soft Hindutva or aligning with erstwhile political enemies just to defeat Narendra Modi and the BJP reduces its viability, uniqueness, and acceptability in the political market (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Above all, Congress must realize that as much as they would like to believe that the rise of BJP is merely a product of Hindu polarization and the Modi wave, the secret of its success goes much beyond (Venkataramakrishnan, 2020). It is an organizational discipline, accommodative attitude, and clearly articulated political narrative that allow the Hindutva-Modi combine to win. If Congress wishes resurrect its glory, it has to look beyond the question of leadership for rejuvenation. In order to arrest its terminal decline, the Congress needs to revisit its foundational principles and its rich political history so as to connect with the electorate.

Conclusion

Sonia Gandhi has been a successful party president. However, her age and declining health must be acknowledged. Today, Narendra Modi and Amit Shah are leaving no space for the Opposition, even though many issues must be thoroughly discussed, including the economic downturn, Covid-19 measures, and the Farmers Bill. Rahul Gandhi has tried to be vocal on these issues, but the discussion has largely remained on social media. In addition, Congress drastically lost its credibility among the masses as a result of the Anna Hazare movement.

What the Congress needs is to be saved from further collapse. Rahul Gandhi will have to take full command and be proactive: get over internal politics, reach out to the streets and raise relevant issues, thereby winning people's confidence and hearts. Instead of seeking a synergy between "old and new", Congress must find a way to involve those who believe in the grassroots struggles and foundational principles of the party. Congress's emphasis on left-oriented politics also cost the organization dearly; however, the Congress needs to understand that the future lies in positioning itself as a Liberal, a middle-of-the-road, policy-oriented, secular party – the way shown by Mahatma Gandhi. This is the only way forward for the Indian National Congress.

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