

INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS AT CROSS ROADS

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ABSTRACT

The paper makes an effort to address the political organization of India before independence and delineates as to the how the organization such as congress became the dominant force in Indian political scenario after independence. Mr. Nehru is even believed to have argued that Congress party should have been dismissed after India attained independence. The most fascinating factor stands that people of India associated the country with congress which helped the party to yield the fruits for decades in the name of Freedom and freedom fighters. The dominance was huge that Rajni Kothari described Indian polity as “Congress system”. The paper tries to evaluate as to how Indian shifts from the congress system to “non- congress” system. On the grounds of research, facts and history one has to acknowledge India lives in politics of competition not legacy.

KEYWORDS: Congress, India, Dominance, Party, Independence, History, Politics, Organization, Leaders, Foundation, Social, Political, Economic

INTRODUCTION

After independence, the largest democracy has largely been ruled or governed by the single largest party that is, of course, Indian national congress. Congress party since its inception in 1885 has evolved as the most organized and vibrant force through every nock and corner of India. Needless, to say the very existence of congress goes to the British account. The congress party had a strong social and ideological base. The party had people from different social fabrics and from different ideologies. The strong social and political base helped congress retain the power for decades. But with the change in Indian political culture the politics of competition erupted which gave the country much needed chance at every crucial juncture to change the guard. Finally, the congress shifts from one party dominance to multi party political tussle.

The foundation of the Indian National Congress on December 28, 1885 at Sir Tej Pal Sanskrit Vidyalaya, Bombay, was not an abrupt occurrence. In fact, idea of a national organization had been going on for quite some time. Bipan Chandra observes, “The culmination of a process of political awakening that had its beginnings in the 1860s and 1870s and took a major leap forward in the late 1870s and early 1880s” (India’s Struggle for Independence, Penguin). The indian nationalists attempted many times to form a group of an all-india scale. Indian Association (founded in 1870) in fact, organized two National Conferences in Calcutta in 1883 and 1885.

But only Allan Octavian Hume, a retired civil servant, succeeded in forming an All India Party with 72 delegates. It is important to note that Hume was not the Sole ‘soul’ in the foundation of an all- india- level party (which was not possible for one single person) rather he took advantage of an already existing atmosphere. Besides, he was more acceptable to Indians as he was free of any regional or caste loyalties. The indian leaders also had an illusion

that Hume had influence in official circle. But there is no denial of the fact that his presence along with Wedenburn, created less suspicion in official circle about Indian National congress.

Bipan Chandra rightly says leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, justice Rande, Pherozechah Mehta, G. Subramaniam Iyer and Surrender Nath `Banerjea(one year later)cooperated with Hume because they did not want to arouse official hostility at such an early stage of their work. They assumed that the rulers would be less suspicious and less likely to attack a potentially subversive organization if its chief organizer was retired British Civil Servant. Gokhale, with his characteristic modesty and political wisdom, stated this explicitly in 1913: ‘no Indian could have started the Indian National Congress...if an Indian had ...come forward to start such a movement embracing all india, the officials in india would not have allowed the movement to come into existence. If the founder of the Congress had not been a great Englishman and a distinguished ex-official, such was the distrust of political agitation in those days that the authorities would have once found some way or the other to suppress the movement.’¹³

In other words, if Hume and other English liberals hoped to use the Congress as a safety- valve, the congress leaders hoped to use Hume as a lightning conductor. And as letter developments show, it was the Congress leaders whose hopes were fulfilled.

R.P. Dutt, for example, wrote that congress was born through a conspiracy to forestall a popular uprising in india and the indian bourgeois leaders were a party to it.

W.C. Bannerji, the president of the first congress made it clear at the very outset that it was not “a nest of conspirators and disloyalists”; they were “thoroughly loyal and consistent well-wishers of the British Government.”⁸⁸(plassey) this explains why the founders of the congress had to involve A.O. Hume in their project.

The Indian national congress, in its true sense, was founded by a new class of intelligentsia which mainly came from Calcutta and Bombay. Most of them met in London in the late 1860s and early 1870s while preparing for the ICS or when studying law. Phero Shah Mehta, Badruddin Tayabji, W.C. Banerji, Manmohan Ghosh, Anand Mohan Bose, Ramesh Chandra Dutta, Surrender Nath Banerji were those leaders who came under the influence of Dadabhai Naoroji who was settled as businessman in England. They raised the issue of Indianisation of civil services, opposed Vernacular Press Act (1878), Arms massive campaign against the Government. The Indians realized the need of a coordinated political party on an all India basis.

Social Policy of Congress

Social policy of the INC is based upon the Gandhian principle of Sarvodaya. In particular INC emphasises upon policies to improve the lives of the economically underprivileged and socially unprivileged sections of society. This includes publicising employment generation efforts for the rural population (through schemes such as National Rural Employment Generation Scheme) etc. The party supports the somewhat contentious notion of family arrangement with birth control.

Economic Policy of Congress

Initially and for a long time, the economic policy of the INC was centred around the public sector and aimed at establishing a "socialistic pattern of society." The party finally adopted the resolution in avadh in 1956 declaring its goal as “SOCIALISM”. However, after the topical embracing of economically liberal policies in progress by Manmohan Singh

the-then Finance Minister in the early 1990s, the economic policy of INC has been distorted somewhat and has now adopted free market policies, though at the same time it is in favour of taking a cautious loom when it comes to liberalising the economy claiming it is to lend a hand make certain that the weaker sectors are not exaggerated too hard by the changes that come with liberalisation.

Foreign Policy of the Congress

Nehru India's first prime minister and external affairs minister is rightly considered the architect of India's foreign policy as well as of the foreign policy doctrine of Indian national congress in particular.

- To preserve the hard earned sovereignty
- To protect the territorial integrity
- To promote the rapid economic development

Nehru wished to attain these objectives through the strategy of non alignment. India's response to the then ongoing Cold War was two-fold: At one level, it took particular care in staying away from the two alliances. Second, it raised its voice against the newly decolonised countries becoming part of these alliances. India's policy was neither negative nor passive. But, critics called Indian foreign policy during cold war an unprincipled and pro USSR particularly in 1971 when india signed a twenty years treaty of friendship peace and cooperation with USSR. Hence, the foreign policy of congress could be called a pro national interest based and slightly unprincipled.

How was Congress a Social and Ideological Coalition?

You have already studied the history of how congress evolved from its origins in 1885 as a pressure group for the newly educated, professional and commercial classes to a mass movement in the twentieth century. This laid the basis for its eventual transformation into a mass political party and its subsequent domination of the political system. Thus the congress began as a party dominated by the English speaking, upper caste, upper-middle class and urban elite. Nut with every civil disobedience movement it launched, its social base widened. It brought together diverse groups, whose interests were often contradictory. Peasants and industrialists, urban dwellers and villagers, workers and owners, middle, lower and upper classes and castes, all found space in the congress. Gradually, its leadership also expanded beyond the upper caste and upper class professionals to agriculture based leaders with a rural orientation. By the time of independence, the congress was transformed into a rainbow –like social coalition broadly representing india's diversity in terms of classes and castes, religions and languages and various interests.

Many of these groups merged their identity within the congress. Very often they did not and continued to exist within the congress as groups and individuals holding different beliefs. In this sense the congress was an ideological coalition as well. It accommodated the revolutionary and pacifist, conservative and radical, extremist and moderate and the right, and all shades of the centre. The congress was a platform for numerous groups, interests and even political parties to take part in the national movement. In pre independence days, many organizations and parties with their own constitution and organizational structure were allowed to exist within the congress. Some of these like the Congress Socialist party, later separated from the congress and became opposition parties. Despite differences regarding the methods, specific programmes and policies the party managed to contain if not resolve differences and built a consensus.

Tolerance and Management of Factions

This coalition –like character of the congress gave it an unusual strength. Firstly, a coalition accommodates all those who join it. Therefore, it has to avoid any extreme position and strike a balance on almost all issues. Compromise and inclusiveness are the hallmarks of coalition. This strategy put the opposition in the party in a difficulty. Secondly, in a party that has the nature of a coalition, there is a greater tolerance of internal differences and ambitions of various groups and leaders are accommodated. The congress did both these things during the freedom struggle and continued doing this even after independence. that is why, even if a group was not happy with the position of the party or with its share of power, it would remain inside the party and fight the other groups rather than leaving the party and becoming an ‘opposition.

These groups inside the party are called factions. the coalitional nature of the congress party tolerated and infact encouraged various factions. Some of these factions were based on ideological considerations but very often these factions were rooted in personal ambitions and rivalries. Instead of being a weakness, internal factionalism became a strength of the congress. Since there was room within the party for various factions to fight with each other, it meant that leaders representing different interests and ideologies remained within the congress rather than go out and from a new party.

Most of the state units of the congress made up of numerous factions. The factions took different ideological positions making the congress appear as a grand centrist party. The other parties primarily attempted to influence these factions and thereby indirectly influenced policy and decision making from the “margins”. They were far removed from the actual exercise of authority. they were not alternatives to the ruling party; instead they constantly pressurised and criticized, censured, and influenced the congress. The system of factions functioned as balancing mechanism within the ruling party. Political competition therefore took place within the congress. In that sense, in the first decade of electoral competition the congress acted both as the ruling party as well as the opposition. That is why this period of indian politics has been described as the ‘Congress system’.

Split in the Congress Party in 1969

On 12 November 1969 Indira Gandhi was debarred from the Congress party for violating the party discipline. Since Indira Gandhi had openly supported V.V.Giri for the post of Indian President against the party candidate Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy. Despite the party Indira’s supported candidate won the election and finally paved the way for long pending split with Indira Gandhi setting up a rival organization, which came to be known as Congress (R) - R for Requisition. The split can in some ways be seen as a left-wing/right-wing division. Indira hunted to use a populist agenda in order to mobilize popular support for the party. The regional party elites, who formed the INC(O), stood for a more right-wing agenda, and distrusted Soviet help.

India Today Observes July 2007

India's grand old party, the Congress, faced its first major split as the old guard led by party President, S. Nijalingappa expelled Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from the party for "fostering a cult of personality". The "Syndicate", as the senior members were called, could not quite come to terms with the fact that the "gungi gudiya" (dumb doll)-their snide reference for Indira-had a mind of her own. "Tragedy overtakes democracy when a leader who rises to power due to popularity, becomes a political narcissist." -S. NIJALINGAPPA Congress president, on Indira Gandhi.

Organised Congress or Indira Dominated Congress

There was a time when congress party was the most organized one in the country from the grass root level to the top level. The organisational structure of party was so stout that had the representation among the women, youth, rural, urban, employed, unemployed, educated, uneducated, tribals so on and so forth. But, Indira's Congress was dependent on Poor, women, Adivasies, minortied and more importantly it was on the shoulders of Indira which routed its organizational and democratic fabric. Though she could manage to win the 1971 elections against the "grand alliances" of non congress non communist parties yet the party lacked what the party was known for in early times even after Independence.

Congress Dominance from 1952-1977

Since the first general elections in india were held in 1951-52 by the single member election commission of india under the supervision and able administration of Sukumar Sen.

Table 1

Year	Total Seats	Seats Won by Congress	Percentage of Seats Won by Congress
1952	489	364	74.43
1957	494	371	75.10
1962	494	361	73.06
1967	520	283	54.42
1971	518	352	67.95

Source: Election commission of India website

Nature of Congress Dominance in the First Three Decades after Independence

The dominance of congress on the political scenario of india was no bolt from the blue to the political analysts of the then times not even to the ordinary Indian voter. Following were the four factors that accounted for the congress dominance in the first three general elections.

First, the party acquired a tremendous amount of good will and political capital from its leadership of the nationalist struggle. Since the party was symbolized with the legacy of national movement which also added to its strength.

The second factor was that the Congress was the only party with an organization extending across the nation and down to the village level. The party's federal structure was based on a system of internal democracy that functioned to resolve disputes among its members and maintain party cohesion.

A third factor was that the Congress achieved its position of political dominance by creating an organization that adjusted to local circumstances rather often reaching the village through local "big men" who controlled village "vote banks." The Intraparty competition served to channel information about local circumstances up the party hierarchy.

Fourth, patronage was the oil that lubricated the party machine. As the state expanded its development role, it accumulated more resources that could be distributed to party members. The Congress party in India enjoyed the benefits of a "virtuous cycle," in which its electoral success gave it access to economic and political resources that enabled the party to attract new supporters.

Table 2: Congress from 1977-2009

Year	Total Seats	Seats Won by Congress Party	Percentage of Seats Won by Congress Party
1977	542	189	34.87
1980	542	374	69
1984	543	414	76.24
1989	545	197	36.14
1991	545	244	44.77
1996	545	140	25.68
1998	545	144	26.42
1999	545	156	28.62
2004	545	145	26.05
2009	543	206	37.93

Source: Election commission of India

Downfall of Congress Party and Emergence of other Parties on the National Scene

There is no exaggeration in the fact that congress party had such a dominance in the political establishment that John Morris is on record to say; The death of Nehru did less to change the Indian political system than the talk about his charismatic leadership might have led us to expect. But one simplification is not to be replaced by another; the assessment of his influence is a matter of real difficulty.

Most delicate of all the tasks perhaps is that of distinguishing between his influence on the actual behaviour of political actors and institutions and his influence on the views taken by observers of such behaviour. How much, that is, of what appears novel in the post-Nehru period is merely the coming to light of features which were already present but obscured or unnoticed by virtue of the attention focused on the great man himself? In no area of the Indian political system is this question more important than in the Congress Party.

The reasons for the downfall of congress party in India after 1977 were;

- Many of the senior leaders of the congress party were either no more or had left the party in shambles.
- Corrupt policies of many congress leaders also led to its downfall.
- New members in the party were not dedicated enough.
- The people stopped casting votes to congress blindly.
- High command of congress had also ignored the regional aspirations of people.
- Splits in congress party were highly responsible for its downfall.
- The bitter experience of 1975 emergency has added to the downfall of congress party.

The political structure of india witnessed the emergence of regional parties and political clubbing of parties popularly known as non- congressism which led to the formation of Janta party that formed government in 1977 hence paved the way for non congress parties at national level. The 1989 election noticeable the second time that Congress vanishing power at the national-level. This election differed in many ways from the 1977 election particularly the 1989 election did not crop up in predominantly curious state of affairs.

Though Congress came to power in 1980 with a thumping majority after having lost in 1977, Congress failed to win an absolute majority since then. The era from 1989 to the present is just as unequivocally characterized competition between different political parties with no one irrelevant or obsolete.

Congress 2014 and after

In the Elections 2014, the main opposition party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the elections by securing 282 seats. In contrast, the incumbent party the Indian National Congress (INC) lost the elections by winning only 44 seats. The 16th Lok Sabha results have been the worst ever for congress which not even the BJP might have expected. The shadows of congress defeat were looming high particularly in the media circles. But, no one including the so called opinion or exit polls were predicting such rout for congress. Lets have a look on what went wrong for Congress in these elections. There are many logical grounds on which congress lost need less to elucidate and necessary to point out; Anti incumbency factor, Rampant Scams and political corruption; High inflation, Modi's aggressive campaign, Rahul Gandhi's Lack of communication skills, Division of congress votes, Aam Aadmi factor, Indian media and lots more these factors need a full paper!

Future of Congress in India

India has witnessed lots of political dramas since 1967 so has been the case with Indian national congress particularly since 1977. In the political history of India congress has ruled for more than fifty years after independence but the recent debacle has resumed a debate on the relevance of congress in future. Many political may oversimplify the fact that congress may be obsolete in future given the recent rout in elections. But, congress has bounced back many times in the past and may repeat the same may after ten or fifteen years if Indian Electorate finds an iota of doubt in the BJP or AAP which has potential to do the wonder as the did last in the State elections of Delhi! Yet every political analyst does believe in the fact that congress may have to look beyond the politics of TOM HARRY OR DICK and find an alternative to fight BJP on the political turf. Though the fact can't be ignored that you do not find the charisma of Nehru in the given congress party, yet someone with political wit, skill and charisma will have to be looked for in or beyond "GANDHI FAMILY". Now, Indian political culture has taken a shift from blind faith to faith in virtue, so the message for all political parties is loud and clear from the recent verdict that is either PERFORM or PERISH. So, the ball is in the court of political parties whether they want to perform or perish!

CONCLUSIONS

The paper makes it abundantly clear that congress party in Indian polity has played an instrumental role in organizing the unorganized before and after independence. The dominance of the party has somehow sowed the seeds for democracy and party based competition. Nevertheless, Indian democratic politics so far had been lacking in the aptitude and the culture of democracy and competition. The largest democracy seems have made a enduring entry into a non congress arena where any Harry can win and some Dick can lose. The educated Indian voter has learned a lesson of teaching a lesson to those who might have lived in the spooning of being the chosen ones which democracy neither adheres nor approves.

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