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NON-CONGRESSISM IN SOUTH INDIA: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

After 1947, the Congress with Nehru at its helm enjoyed comprehensive hegemony over Indian democracy. However, the serial splintering of the party, the emergence of other political parties, and the electoral successes of non- and anti-Congress coalitions attenuated the claims of Congress and its leaders to speak for the 'people-as-a-whole'. Nehru's domination of the Congress increased with the death in 1950 of his Home Minister V.B. Patel, his one-time rival for the post of Prime Minister, who had differed with him on the Partition, on Hindu and minority rights, and on Kashmir. Congressism and anti-Congressism were thus both constructed around Nehru.

INTRODUCTION

India has had ancient legacy in political ideas as well as practice. By and large, both the politics and governance were sensitized by language and culture. All the political systems including their process are also viewed as bringing goodness by emphasizing on virtue and justice. Its structure and functions are strongly believed for moving towards making the citizens good. The good citizens can sustain the good political system and its governance. The essence of classical political philosophy rightly reflects this idea. Formed in 1885, The Indian National Congress was the first party to claim to speak for the Indian people-as-a-whole. Over this time, while the Congress has dominated Indian politics and claimed to represent the Indian people, the anti-Congress alliances have indicated alternative logics of composing an alternative 'Indian people'.

THE BIRTH OF NON-CONGRESSISM

From its formation in 1885 to national independence in 1947, the Congress was movement and party in its own right, as well as a party of parties and a movement of movements that encompassed a wide range of political projects as well as positions. As a united anti-colonial front, its membership included communists like E.M.S.Namboodiripad, socialists like Ram Manohar Lohia; centrists and left-liberals such as Nehru and his allies; rightists like C.Rajagopalachari and Rajendra Prasad, Hindu Mahasabha member S.P. Mukherjee, and the founder of the Muslim League, Muhammad Jinnah. Gandhi, who eclectically drew on early communitarian trends in pre-Marxist socialism, anarchism and on traditions and religions intellectual and social resources, spanned these positions. He came to embody, for many, the 'people-as-a-whole', a claim scathingly critiqued by B.R. Ambedkar, who, alone among the giants of early 20th century Indian politics, was never a Congress member. The Communists split between those who regarded the Congress as a reactionary body and therefore an adversary, and others who wanted to work with it in the anti-colonial struggle. Along with socialists, they were members of the party-within-the-party called the Congress Socialist Party.¹

After the Emergency was lifted and elections called in 1977, the Janata Party, a large anti-Congress coalition, formed governments at the centre and in many states. Strong regional ex-Congress leaders, who had left the party and were victimized, were key elements of the Janata Party. The origins of today's anti-Congress alliances – both the BJP-led NDA and the non-BJP non-Congress “third front” – lie in this moment when Socialists, Congress splinters, new regional parties, and the BJP, shared state power. But, this coalition could not claim to represent the people-as-a-whole. Janata Party leaders wanted to dissolve previous party affiliations to form a broad

front of all non-Congress parties, excluding the Left. However, the BJP refused to dissolve itself, and sharp conflicts arose between Morarji Desai and the other major partners. This government fell in 1980 when Charan Singh and his party withdrew support. Mrs.Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, but the earlier congressism was now decisively over. She sold off some public sector assets to raise capital for development and signal a truce with the capitalist class.²

Role of Regional Parties

Regional parties draw their influences from two major sources. The first one is the concentration of their supporters in a particular geographic area which helps them to concentrate their attention on certain constituencies at election time. Because of this concentration of attention, relatively few votes for regional parties are wasted. In fact few votes are cast in constituencies where candidates of regional parties have no chance of winning. On the other hand, the regional parties generally avoid to field candidates in those constituencies or areas where they do not have at least a marginal support base. Secondly, regional parties draw considerable influence from the stability they enjoy. Their relatively constant base of support in particular locals helps them in promoting these programmes that would benefit their constituencies. This stability of regional parties proves extremely beneficial in certain circumstances especially when the regional parties are in a position to form government at the state level in coalition with other parties.

The criteria for determining whether a party is national or regional two factors are taken into consideration: (1) the number of States enjoying popular electoral support, and (2) the percentage of votes polled by it in the State Assembly and the Lok Sabha elections. The first criterion is territorial and the second one relates to the popularity of the party. Further, some scholars seek to identify a regional party in terms of its ethnicity or religion-cultural identity. The DMK and AIADMK are regional political parties because these parties represent 'Tamil Culture' and 'Tamil Nationalism'. Shiromani Akali Dal too is a regional party and is so far as it is a Panthic Party and gets almost the whole of its support from the Sikhs in Punjab and, to a limited extent, also in Haryana and Delhi. Telugu Desam, Asom Gana Parishad, Sikkim Sangram Parishad, National Conference, BJD Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Bangla Congress, Oriya Congress, Kerala Congress, PDP in J & K, Trinamool Congress, Meghalya Democratic Alliance, Indian National Lok Dal etc. are all Regional parties.³

Rise of Regional Parties

Existence of regional parties is nothing new. Their entry into national level politics is however a new phenomenon. In 1977, the Akali Dal and DMK were partners in the Janata

government, although the Janata Party had a clear majority of 295 seats on its own. This was the first time that regional parties shared power at the national level. There were 51 members in Lok Sabha belonging to various regional parties in 1977. In 1980, regional parties lost their newly found moment of glory when Congress returned to power. The DMK managed to win 16 seats but Akalis were reduced to one seat and the total tally of regional parties including the smaller left parties of West Bengal remained only 35 in the seventh Lok Sabha. But in 1984, regional parties increased their share in Lok Sabha. There were 76 members belonging to different regional parties in the eighth Lok Sabha. The rise of Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and Assam Gana Parishad in Assam were the main factors responsible for this performance of the regional parties. However, with Congress having 415 seats in Lok Sabha, the role of regional parties was bound to be insignificant in national politics.

Non-Congressism brought several regional parties together for the formation of the National Front (NF) formed in 1988. These included TDP, DMK, AGP and Congress (S) apart from the newly formed Janata Dal. But in the elections in 1989, these regional parties did not meet with success. In the ninth Lok Sabha, 48 members belonged to regional parties but the regional allies of NF had only two seats won by TDP. In 1991, the strength of regional parties in the Lok Sabha was at 57 but this time around TDP had a fair share of 13 seats. AIADMK, Janata Dal (G), Indian Union Muslim League (IUM), Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) and Kerala Congress supported the Congress government of P.V.Narasimha Rao. However, these parties were not part of the government. In any case, both in 1989 and 1991, regional parties were playing a crucial role at the national level in making or unmaking the central government. Thus, the 1977 elections not only speeded up the demise of the Congress system but also inaugurated a new era of partnership between all-India parties and regional parties something which never happened in the pre-1977 period. The regional forces—at least some of them—quickly switched over to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1998. The Lok Sabha in 1998 included 162 MPs belonging to regional parties and 92 of these were part of the NDA. TDP, which was one of the leading parties of UF, chose to join the NDA, which proved crucial for the survival of the government. Another regional party, AIADMK, played a decisive role in defeating the NDA government. The thirteenth Lok Sabha (1999) has 168 MPs who belong to regional parties. The NDA includes 109 MPs from different regional parties.⁴

Role of Regional Political Parties Indian Politics

Being mainly confined to a few areas or states, the non-Congress forces have been more successful in 'challenging the Congress' dominance at state levels. Thus, the Communist Party, the first political party in India to successfully replace the Congress from power in an Indian state, has been primarily confined to Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura. The DMK, which identified itself with the "Tamil nationalism" and Tamil-speakers, emerged as a strong power but confined to Tamil Nadu. The Telugu Desam founded by N.T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh in 1982, the Janata Dal with its various offshoots in U.P., Bihar, Karnataka and Orissa, the National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir, the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Assam Gana Parishad in Assam are other major regional powers, which have grown up at the cost of the Congress influence and consequently, in about half of the states, the non-Congress governments have come to stay. These state-based parties are distinguished by their adoption of a regional-national perspective, by their political desire for greater regional autonomy of states in the Indian Union, for their focus on issues specific to their states or for their base within a religious minority. The regional powers identified with the anti-Congress governments have been of different kinds and forms, with their corresponding effects on the

Indian polity. The extreme form of regionalism, in the form of "secession from the Indian Union" took place in the south India, when the D.M.K. demanded a separate independent sovereign state on June 5, 1960, and organized a campaign to achieve this goal. The D.M.K. also extended its demand to the formation of an independent Republic of Dravidnad consisting of the states of Madras, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka, on the ground that "people of southern India were of a different stock from northern India and that the South had been neglected by the Union Government."⁵

THE DECLINE OF CONGRESSISM AND THE RISE OF ANTI-CONGRESSISM

Classic Congressism declined post-Nehru, and the political field became more heterogeneous. The Communist Party of India split several times over: in 1964 when the pro-China CPI-M was formed and further in 1967 on the question of initiating an armed Maoist revolution in India. The 'Naxalite' movement represented a weaponized critique of the Nehruvian model of transformation from feudalism to socialism, and attracted youth from urban centres and rural hinterlands. Charan Singh, representing landed farmers in UP, who had previously challenged Nehru's socialist and collectivist plans for agrarian development, left the party in 1967 to form the Bharatiya Lok Dal. Lohia cooperated with Charan Singh and the BJS in the formation of a non-Congress government in UP in 1967, a year that saw the emergence of another non-Congress government in Tamil Nadu.

In 1967, the Congress split between the Congress (R) that supported Indira Gandhi's takeover of the party and as Prime Minister and Congress (O) that opposed it. In the mid-1970s, these splinters combined with other parties in new contexts: for example in the 1974 by-elections in which the Socialist Sharad Yadav 6 was contesting, the BJS star Atal Behari Vajpayee and some from the Congress (O) and BLD campaigned. In this period of drift, disintegration and realignment, the Congress became a reduced entity, needing support from other parties to form governments in Bengal and Kerala. However, two moments allowed Mrs. Indira Gandhi to claim that role of representing the people-as-a-whole. Firstly, victory in the 1971 war with Pakistan, established her as a strong leader within India and internationally. Secondly, this reputation was enhanced by India's first nuclear test in Pokhran in 1974, which signaled the technological advancement of a poor country.

Both the Emergency as well as the anti-Emergency movement contained contradictory positions. Referring admiringly to Mrs. Gandhi as "Chandi avatar," (the goddess Durga), then-RSS chief Deoras supported aspects of the Emergency and sought common ground with her. After the 1971 war Vajpayee – then leader of the Jana Sangh – was reported to have called her 'Abhinav Chandi Durga'. But the student's wing of the BJP, and sections of the RSS, opposed the Emergency actively. On the left, the Naxalites and CPM opposed the Emergency but CPI supported it, as they perceived it to be a move against the religious right in India, and imperialism internationally. The Emergency ended when Mrs. Gandhi, facing mass movements and found guilty of electoral malpractice, was forced to rescind it and resign in 1977, paving the way for the first non-Congress government at the centre. By then, the 'people-as-a-whole' composed in the political settlement of 1947 had long disintegrated.⁶

Not only did the emergency signal the formal birth of an anti-Congress mood in the country, but it also triggered structural fault lines that the country's oldest party never overcame. Hours after the Emergency was imposed on the midnight of 25 June 1975, police turned up at the doorstep of Jayaprakash Narayan, the lightning rod for social unrest against the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi, to arrest him. Anti-Congress sentiments had firmly taken root. The

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the dual leadership of Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, slowly began to piece together a national alternative—initially as an opposition and later as a government. The fault lines within the party had only widened as the party struggled to define itself in a visibly transforming India. The economic transformation was slowly beginning to stoke aspirations across the population. Even its return to power in 2004, largely on account of the BJP's inexplicable implosion, was as a coalition—the first time the Congress was attempting such an experiment at the centre. The latter half of the 1990s witnessed formation of as many as five non-Congress governments. The first among these was the BJP government under the leadership of Bajpayee for a period of only 13 days. The Vajpayee government was succeeded by the United Front government under H.D. Deve Gowda and was backed by the Congress (I). As the Congress (I) enhanced its pressure, the United Front was forced to effect a change in the leadership. Thus, Deve Gowda had to quit paving the way for I.K. Gujral to become the Prime Minister, though the Gujral Government too could not last long.⁷

After the 12th Lok Sabha elections, the BJP led coalitional government representing 13 parties was formed under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. But from its very beginning, the Vajpayee government was faced with internal troubles arising out of personal ambitions and lack of coalitional culture. Consequently, after a period of 13 months, the fourth non-Congress experiment in the second half of the 1990s failed. In the following elections in 1999, once again BJP led alliance of 24 parties was voted to power and since its formation, it has completed two year and has entered third year of its life. Strikingly, its decline was matched by the corresponding rise of the BJP—very akin to a see-saw. At the end of the 16th general election in 2014, the wheel seems to have turned a full circle. The BJP replaced the Congress as the principal pole of Indian politics and we have a majority government at the centre after a gap of 30 years—worse, the Congress presence in the Lok Sabha has shrunk to a humiliating low. The 40th anniversary of the Emergency should then be an apt moment for the Congress to rethink its space in the Indian polity. Electorally, it survives, for the moment, partly in the south and mostly in the north-east. Regaining the heartland will need much more than Discovery of India tours by its political heir apparent Rahul Gandhi. It is not so much about outsmarting a wily BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi.⁸

CONCLUSION

From 1885 to Indian Independence in 1947, the Congress was movement and party in its own right, as well as a party of parties and a movement of movements which encompassed a wide range of political projects and positions. After the Emergency was lifted and elections were called in 1977, the Janata Party, a large anti-Congress coalition, formed governments in the centre as well as several states. Non-Congressism brought many regional parties together in the National Front (NF) formed in 1988. These included TDP, DMK, AGP and Congress (S) apart from the newly formed Janata Dal. But in the elections in 1989, these regional parties did not meet with success.

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