

How Do We Revive Healthy Politics In India?

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

When India became independent the one and only national level political party was the Congress, whose identity as the party in the vanguard of the freedom movement gave it a very special place in the hearts and minds of Indians. Mahatma Gandhi was the national icon, he galvanised the people into participation in the freedom movement, he was the conscience keeper of the nation and he provided that degree of leadership which enabled the Congress to become the party of the nation. The freedom struggle brought together widely disparate group of people under the umbrella of the Congress Party and welded them together as a potent force for fighting British imperialism. The Mahatma clearly understood that the glue which held together all these people was a common enemy, British rule in India, to oust for which we needed a unified command and a concerted effort aimed at bringing independence to India. Gandhiji was the unified command and the Congress made a concerted effort to hold together a wide variety of people in order to make that concerted effort.

When independence came Gandhiji realised that apart from the Congress there was no viable political party and, therefore, no viable Opposition. Therefore, the government of independent India would constitute the rule of one single party. Louis Fischer, in his book, 'The Life of Mahatma Gandhi' states, "... he realised that a one party system could actually be a no party system, for when the government and the party are one, the party is a rubber stamp and leads only a fictitious existence". To quote Fischer again he said that Gandhiji understood that, "Without free criticism and potent opposition, democracy dies, without political criticism and opposition, the nation's intellect, culture and public morality stagnate, big men are purged and small men become kowtowing pygmies. The leaders surround themselves with cowards, sycophants and grovelling yes-men whose automatic approval is misread as a tribute to greatness". Gandhiji further realised that groups within the Congress, such as the Socialists, had ideological, political and personal differences with conservative and right wing Congressmen. He also knew that perhaps opposition to the British would be replaced by the cementing force of power which would hold together these different groups, but ultimately, as Lord Acton said, "\Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Therefore, power as a cementing force would also be the main source of corruption. To quote Gandhiji, "There is so much corruption today that it frightens me". Gandhiji wanted the checks and balances of a strong opposition and of freely expressed public opinion to keep the government under control. His advice was that after independence the Congress should disband itself so that people holding different ideologies could come together and form political parties based on their own philosophy, with each party sometimes being in government and at other times in opposition. Had the Mahatma been heeded India would have had a middle of the road party, perhaps the Congress, a left of centre party, perhaps the Socialists and a right of centre party, perhaps the Swatantra Party of C. Rajagopalachari. This would have kept in check religious fundamentalism, Left extremism and unbridled right wing capitalism.

Mahatmaji was unfortunately not listened to and the Congress enjoyed twenty years of almost absolute power. However, because of the Mahatma and the legacy he left behind the miniscule opposition did function with a degree of effectiveness because people such as

Shyama Prasad Mukherji of the Hindu Mahasabha, Randive, Homi Daji and Shakir Ali Khan of the Communist Party and Ram Manohar Lohia of the Socialist Party enjoyed a very special position in Indian politics and were heard with respect. At the same time the internal bickering within and jockeying for power in the Congress did create strains and there were signs that the system of one party government could not continue indefinitely. Because the Mahatma was not heeded, when the Congress started breaking apart splinter groups rather than defined political parties emerged and the fragmentation of Indian politics began. The culmination was in 1967.

What is the importance of 1967? That is the year in which in States such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana the purchase of Members of the Legislative Assembly began in order to make them defect from the ruling party, cause the elected government to fall and to bring to power new coalitions of persons who had no ideological similarity but who had sold themselves in order to get power. This is the blackest day in the history of India because now legislators realised that they enjoy a price, which could only be paid by subversion of the State and widespread corruption, which resulted in the end of principled government in India. Ideology, a political agenda and a programme of governance no longer had any place in the Indian polity and what became important was to come to power, use power to buy more power or to continue in power and for this purpose convert public servants from their role of service into predators. No political party in India has been free of the taint of coming to power through corruption and remain in power through more corruption. It is almost as if the politicians have become a breed apart, self-centred, self-seeking and totally indifferent to national interests and the welfare of people at large.

Playing the blame game may be cathartic, but it solves no problems and gives no desirable results. Nevertheless, if we are to improve the system we have to understand who was responsible for its downfall. Because the Congress enjoyed more than twenty years of unchallenged rules this is the party which must accept the largest share of the blame for the degradation of our polity and the corruption which both caused it and emanated from it. Why did this happen? So long as the Mahatma was alive the Congress had internal party democracy. On 15th November, 1947 J.B. Kripalani, the President of the Congress Party, resigned, stating that though it is the party from which government derives powers the government chooses to ignore the party. As a replacement Gandhiji suggested the name of Acharya Narendra Deo, a leading socialist. Unfortunately both Nehru and Sardar Patel wanted a President who would be weak and, therefore, they suggested the name of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, despite Gandhiji's advice that Rajendra Prasad should not offer himself as a candidate. Ultimately Nehru prevailed and Rajendra Prasad became the Congress President. From that day on the Congress has never looked back and either the Congress President has been weak, like Devkant Baruah, or Indira Gandhi has been President and, in due course, Sonia Gandhi is the President. Indira Gandhi was both Congress President and the Prime Minister and combined in herself State power and party power. Sonia Gandhi is not Prime Minister, but as Chairwoman of the National Advisory Council and leader of the UPA she definitely controls both party and government.

To return to the question of democracy I must tell in brief two incidents separated from each other by a gap of twenty-six years. In 1958 I was Assistant Collector in Morena District and Dr. K.N. Katju was Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. He, accompanied by his powerful Home Minister, Narsingrao Dixit, came to Morena on an official visit. They were duly received by the District Collector and other district officers at the circuit house and subsequently the Chief Minister had a meeting with the officers. That evening, there was a public meeting

organised by the Congress Party. There were only two chairs on the dais and when Mr. Dixit tried to climb up the podium after the Chief Minister Dr. Katju firmly told him to sit with the audience and invited the District Congress Chief, Shri Rathi, to sit by his side. The message was that so far as the Congress Party was concerned, in Morena the most important person was the District Congress President, and why not? He had been elected by party workers in open election and he truly represented the party in the district. The Congress still had a semblance of internal party democracy in those days. Twenty-six years later in 1984 I had already put in my papers and was awaiting the expiry of my notice period. Ramgopal Tiwari was the Pradesh Congress Chief and he called on Muni Prasad Shukla, the Revenue Minister, with a request that a particular thing should be done. I was summoned and I advised against the suggested course of action as being contrary to law and the rules. Ramgopal Tiwari angrily told the Minister that he was the PCC President and the Minister should not pay heed to what a mere officer has advised. Muni's reply was, "Mr. Buch has come through a tough competitive examination. I am a Minister because I was elected. You, Ramgopal, are only an imposition of the High Command and, therefore, I prefer to seek advice from my Secretary". Ramgopal Tiwari represented a superimposed functionary, not elected by the party and appointed by a far away High Command. The Congress Party no longer had internal democracy.

I shall return to the Congress Party in due course, but it is necessary here to review the other political parties who are players on the Indian political stage. Let us begin from the Left. Upto 1962 the Communist Party of India was the major representative of the Left. In 1962 at the time of the Sino-Indian war the party split into the Communist Party of India –Marxist (CPM) and Communist Party of India (CPI). An extreme Left wing group became the Naxalites or Communist Party (Marxist Leninist), who did not believe in the democratic system and advocated a class war based on violence. The Left has remained splintered ever since and though in 2004 it did enjoy a moment of glory as one of the major supporters of the first UPA government, this advantage was frittered away over the question of the nuclear deal and the 2009 election saw the Left decimated in Parliament. In the subsequent State elections the Left lost its two major State strongholds in West Bengal and Kerala. Defeat should be a time of introspection, a time for planning the future, a review of both ideology and policy and a period of consolidation.

To me the schism between CPI and CPI (M) is rather like the Shia-Sunni divide in Islam. One of the major hallmarks of a Muslim is that he can perform Haj. For a non-Muslim to enter the municipal limits of Mecca is to invite a mandatory death sentence. Because a Shia can perform the Haj he is by definition a Muslim. Islam is a highly unitary religion which is against sectarianism and, therefore, there cannot be a divide on account of the basic tenets of the faith between two different groups. One either accepts the Kalima, or one is not a Muslim. No one has been able to explain to me the religious difference between a Shia and a Sunni. The Shia-Sunni divide, therefore, is founded on a major difference of opinion on who should have been the Imam of the Caliphate. Because Islam does not recognise a prophet other than Mohammed, Sallalah Waleh Sallalam, the post of Imam is temporal and has no spiritual significance. A fight over who should be Imam, therefore, is a struggle for power and has nothing whatsoever to do with religious belief. It is in this context that I look at the divide between CPI and CPI (M). Both parties are weak because they will not come together, iron out their differences in matters of detail rather than principle and come together as a unified Left. The Left certainly has a significance in India and it would be a great pity if it faded away, leaving the door open for Left extremism and its counterpart Right extremism.

In the case of the Socialists the story is somewhat similar in that the Samajwadi Party and the Janata Dal of Lalu Yadav have no ideological differences because they no longer have an ideology. Local-centric power is the name of their game and, therefore, socialist unity in India is a distant mirage. Unfortunately it has manifested itself in the form of regional groupings and this has been aggravated by the emergence of a large number of small regional groups in States such as Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Because the interests are local a national perspective is not developing and these parties are now just groups of people pushing their own little agenda. This agenda does not have the nation in mind and is not aimed at furthering public welfare. Therefore, the Trinamool Congress insists on the Railway Ministry because it feels that this Ministry has a vast potential of being milked for both financial and political gains. DMK, on the other hand, wants the Communications and the Shipping Ministries, because Communications proved to be a virtual Kamadhenu for DMK. The emergence of regional parties now poses a grave danger both to the integrity of India as a country and a strong government at the Centre which can provide governance which is people oriented, honest, development minded and just.

This brings us to a major component of Indian politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It is a serious contender for power in the Centre, having governed for several years as the lead party of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). It rules the States of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh and it shares power as a partner in Bihar and the Punjab. This party claims to have internal democracy, though there are allegations that the ultimate outcome of who will lead the party depends on the approval of the RSS, which is at least the mentor if not the controlling authority of BJP. One of the main charges against BJP is that it is excessively influenced by RSS, which enjoys poor secular credentials and, therefore, through its Hindutva programme, BJP is strongly inclined to communal politics. This is vehemently denied by BJP, though it is a fact that Hindu rituals, Hindu practices, Hindu festivals, etc., enjoy State patronage in BJP governed States. That by itself means nothing because there are equal allegations against other parties such as the Congress that they, too, extend patronage to different religions on different religious occasions and this does not exclude Hindu festivals. Unfortunately there is suspicion about BJP amongst the minorities, especially the Muslims, and BJP has not been able to completely allay it.

In its heart of hearts BJP knows that it cannot allow a permanent sense of alienation to exist amongst more than fifteen crores Muslims and L.K. Advani on more than one occasion has expressed this view. At the same time the Muslims do not trust BJP and, therefore, the party has a really uphill task of convincing the minorities that they are not its target. If Americans have Israel as their millstone which prevents them from reaching out to the Arabs and solving the problem of Palestine, BJP has the Babri Masjid and the Hindutva programme as its own surplus baggage which drags it down. BJP has to fine-tune its policies so that a balance is struck between Hindu interests, minority interests and the needs of secular India and if BJP does this successfully it has a very good chance of winning the next elections, If it does not address the question seriously then one cannot say how it can come to power in the foreseeable future. BJP best bet is to credibly convince the minorities that they will be safe, comfortable, with equal access to opportunities for advancement under BJP rule, without treating them as a vote bank or hesitating to consolidate Hindu votes. We need the Congress,

but we equally need the BJP and its leaders would do the country a great disservice if they are not able to arrive at this balance.

To return to the Congress, Indira Gandhi was responsible for not only destroying internal democracy but also for promoting her family as the only natural choice for leading the Congress Party. First Sanjay and then Rajiv held the reins of the party, especially Rajiv after Sanjay and Indira departed from the scene. Not only did the party focus exclusively on Indira and Rajiv, it also voluntarily gave up any semblance of internal free thinking when Indira firmly was in the saddle. No one in the party questioned the right of Sonia to succeed Rajiv Gandhi as the supreme leader and now the party sycophants are promoting Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra Gandhi as the undisputed leaders of the party and future Prime Ministers of the country. There is hardly any election for party posts and in Madhya Pradesh in the last local government elections the party went to the polls with thirty-eight districts Congress committees not having a President. Village units no longer elect the Mandal units, the Mandals do not elect the D.C.C. President and certainly the P.C.Cs do not elect the State President, who is appointed by Sonia Gandhi. The whole party leadership from top to bottom is nominated and does not represent the choice of workers at the grassroots.

A senior Congress leader once told me that anyone who believes that the Congress is a party is a fool. It is the personal fiefdom of the Nehru-Feroze Gandhi family. If the top leadership of the Congress believes this then what Mahatmaji said about sycophants and cowards surrounding the leader holds true. Boorish and, perhaps, uncharitable it may sound, but perhaps the time has come for the Congress to completely come out of the shadow of this family, forget Sonia Gandhi and her children in the matter of leading the party and instead try and establish democratic functioning in which grassroot workers really determine who their leaders will be. When a prop is removed one feels shaky and, perhaps, the party without the Feroze Gandhi family will feel orphaned and exposed. However, if the party is to have a future as a self-sustaining organisation with great influence in Indian politics it will have to take this step. There is still a great deal of talent in the Congress Party and if it rebuilds itself from village level upwards it can go back to becoming a party of the type which existed before 1967. This is very important because India does need a middle-of-the-road party and the Congress is best qualified to fulfil this role, just as the BJP is best qualified to act as the right of centre party. Ultimately it is these parties, kept on a short rein by a resurgent Left, which can provide purposive, well directed welfare based government to the people of India.
