

The Rise and Fall Of The Congress Party

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The origins of the Congress Party, founded in 1885 by Allan Octavian Hume, lay in forming an organisation to put the Indian point of view before the British, obtain redressal of grievances and persuade government to increasingly associate Indian aspirations. It is only in 1919 when General Dyer at Jallianwala Bagh fired mercilessly on unarmed Indians, killing scores and wounding even more. This one act of brutality revolutionised our thinking and the Congress now changed from being a low key reformist group into the vanguard of the freedom movement.

The British tried to avoid the inevitable by measures such as the Morely-Minto Reforms and Montague-Chelmsford Reforms which sought to pass limited power at local government level and partially in the provincial governments to elected representatives. Then came the Government of India Act 1935, which transferred power in the provinces to elected governments. These measures were too little and too late and when in 1942 Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement the Congress refused to compromise at anything less than full independence. Two groups dissociated themselves, the first being the Communist Party which called for support to the British because the Soviet Union had been invaded by Germany and the British were the allies of the Soviets. Because this ran contrary to the united Indian call for independence, the Communist Party remained isolated from the mainstream and despite some regional success in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, the Communist Party in its various avatars is at best only at the margin. The second group was the Ambedkarites who feared an independent India would be dominated by the upper castes and the lower castes would be given a raw deal.

The Mahatma realised that the struggle for freedom is what held disparate groups together in the Congress Party and that the party itself had no ideology which could bring it unity. Even in the matter of how to fight the British, Subhash Chandra Bose who favoured an armed struggle had already separated from the Congress and had exiled himself in Germany and later in Japan. Gandhiji, whose nonviolent satyagraha proved to be the better weapon, had advised the Congress to dissolve itself after independence and for different ideological groups to form their own parties. Unfortunately the Congress did not heed this advice because power proved to be the cementing force and obviously it could not be enjoyed except as member of a party which had the majority in the Legislature. Because Nehru was himself a giant but who was accompanied by stalwarts who were giants in their own capacity, the Congress remained a dominant force in the Indian polity. However, despite the fact that Nehru was basically a democrat who was prepared to live quite amicably with his opponents, the personality of Nehru and his preeminent stature meant that there was a loss of inner democracy within the party as power became concentrated in the person and persona of Nehru.

The ascent of Indira Gandhi completely changed the scenario. By her very nature she could not permit anyone to become her equal and the Congress rapidly sank into an organisation in which other than Indira no one else counted. In fact it is D.K. Baruah, the nominal President of the Congress, who coined the phrase, "India is Indira, Indira is India" Systematically Indira Gandhi eliminated all the stalwarts who had stood beside her father and instead surrounded

herself by courtiers and sycophants. The party mattered little to her and when defections occurred in Madhya Pradesh through bribery, instead of listening to D.P. Mishra and causing the House to be dissolved, she allowed her dislike of D.P. Mishra to sacrifice the party and permit Govind Narain Singh to take over as Chief Minister, despite the fact that it is he who caused the revolt. From this day on politics became not a means of promoting welfare but rather a game of buying power, then subverting the government to make money in order to retain power and then use power itself to perpetuate one's power. This saw the replacement of the politics of honesty and ideology by the politics of corruption.

Formerly the Congress had an elected hierarchy in which village units chose the mandal head, the mandals elected the district chief and the district units recommended names for the presidentship of the Pradesh Congress. That all went by the board and from Indira's days all office bearers were nominated by the high command. From a democratic party the Congress degenerated into a coterie of sycophants. Unfortunately the party further degenerated into becoming the personal fiefdom of Indira Gandhi's family and apart from Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi there is virtually no Congress leadership. This has given rise to extra constitutional power entities such as the National Advisory Council led by Sonia Gandhi, which has no accountability, but which still dictates policy to government. This has weakened both party and government.

One of the evil outfalls of what has happened to the Congress is that in India expediency and populism have replaced ideology, policy, programmes and good government. Competitive populism has destroyed every institution in India and, unfortunately, the will to govern. In fact the desire for good governance has been replaced by the politics of expediency, which means a corrupt government.

We need the Congress as a middle of the road party. For this the Congress has to free itself from the clutches of a single family and go back to the position which existed in 1957-58, when village units, mandal units and district units democratically decided who would head the Congress at each level. The high command itself came from this route. Therefore, for its own sake and for the sake of multi-party democracy in India, the Congress should restore internal democracy so that at whatever level there is leadership, it is backed by the support of the party workers and is not superimposed from above. This must be accorded the highest priority if the Congress is to regain its former position. The importance of the middle of the party is that it sets the benchmark and defines the perimeter of permissible political action, within which bounds both the extreme left and the extreme right must function. That is what makes a democracy so vibrant and yet responsible. When moderate parties yield ground extreme elements rush in to occupy this space. That is how Naxalism prospers and extremism gains. To prevent this we need strong democratic institutions and parties which are confident of their own capability. That is why Congress must reinvent itself by democratising itself.
