

## Reinventing the Congress

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

The word 'dynasty' has a very special meaning which, according to the Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century dictionary is, a succession of rulers from the same family. The word family is defined as "a group consisting of a set of parents and children; a group of people related to one another by blood or marriage". Every dynasty is a family but every family does not constitute a dynasty. Which is the stage at which a family becomes a dynasty? Motilal Nehru gave rise to a family of which Jawaharlal Nehru, as his son, was a member. Neither Motilal nor Jawaharlal, though constituting a family, were a dynasty. Jawaharlal Nehru gave up his plutocratic life style in order to wear the garb of a freedom fighter. Ultimately he did become the Prime Minister of India but through a process of election in which he led his party to victory. Nehru was not part of a dynasty. It can be argued that when after an interregnum in which first Gulzarilal Nanda pro tem and then Lal Bahadur Shastri became the Prime Minister of India, Indira became the Prime Minister, that this was a dynastic succession. However, she was not selected as the successor by Nehru and, therefore, her coming to power after Lal Bahadur Shastri's death cannot really be attributed to dynastic rule.

During her lifetime and especially prior to and immediately after the declaration of Emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution, Indira actively nursed her son Sanjay Gandhi for a high political role. During the Emergency Sanjay Gandhi became larger than the sum total of the Congress Party. This is the stage at which the Nehru-Gandhi family assumed a dynastic role. The Congress became the monopoly of one single family, the patron of which was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and the constituents of which were the family members born out of the marriage of Indira Nehru and Feroz Gandhi.

Sanjay Gandhi died in an unfortunate accident and Indira mourned for him. Had she left it at this and had the Congress restored democratic control to the party, dynastic rule in India would have been avoided. Indira, looking for a successor, chose her elder son, Rajiv. The rest is history. Indira was assassinated and the Congress Party, now no better than courtiers in a feudal court sycophantically insisted on the anointment of Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi's becoming Prime Minister was a definite establishment of dynastic rule because if Nehru was Babur and Indira was Humayun, then certainly Rajiv was Akbar in the Nehru-Gandhi family. However much the Congress may deny it we were firmly in the hands of dynasts and the Congress had ceased to be a democratically organised political party. When Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated the party's choice fell on Sonia Gandhi, who became a part of the dynasty through marriage to Rajiv, to lead the Congress Party. The same party has now rooted for Rahul Gandhi. Throughout the second innings of UPA the refrain was that Manmohan Singh was keeping the seat warm for Rahul who would occupy it in mid 2014. Unfortunately Narendra Modi played the spoil-sport and the Congress was routed in the 2014 general election. When an unprecedented and total defeat overtakes a party it is time for introspection. Everywhere else in the democratic world the party leadership immediately accepts responsibility and steps down so that the party can reorganise itself. Nitish Kumar has done so in Bihar and whatever are the motives, one has to appreciate the principled reaction to a massive electoral defeat. Both Sonia and Rahul should have stepped aside and told the party to do a deep introspection on why the party did so badly in 2014. The signal should have been very clear that the Gandhi family accepted that there was time

for change and that to enable this to happen Sonia and her son would remove themselves from the picture. After successive defeats at the hands of the Conservatives led by Margaret Thatcher in Britain the Labour Party went in for a completely new leadership and Tony Blair, casting aside the shibboleths of yesteryear, virtually reinvented the Labour Party and led it to victory. All that Sonia and Rahul did was to very half-heartedly suggest that they could resign and the bunch of worshippers who constituted the AICC executive outdid each other in the chorus that they must continue. The status quo was maintained.

What surprises me is the complete lack of objectivity of our media, which still harps on Rahul as the future of the Congress. The refrain is that in order to revitalise the Congress Rahul must reinvent himself. Why Rahul? What is so special about him except the accident of birth in a particular family? His entire election campaign indicated a man with limited intelligence and imagination, poor communication skills and almost a juvenile approach to the larger questions which attend upon the Indian polity. At the time of election, apart from a report card, the electorate expects the political aspirants to place before the people their agenda for the future and for the next five years. Rahul did not say how he would go about the task of eliminating poverty. Apart from harking back on the so called achievements which never went beyond paper Rahul Gandhi had nothing to offer to the electorate for the future. Abusing Modi is not a substitute for an agenda of governance, but Rahul Gandhi never rose above this. The issue here is no longer one of Rahul Gandhi reinventing himself. Rather it is one of the Congress reinventing itself, which means that whereas Sonia and Rahul would certainly be welcome as workers of Congress Party, they have to give up their leadership syndrome. If, after proving themselves in the field, Sonia and Rahul find their way back into the leadership, the Congress could revive itself whilst moving away from dynastic rule. After all, BJP did discard its entire old leadership which had failed to deliver the goods and it put together a younger team of dedicated workers, which included technocrats, under the captaincy of Narendra Mod. The results are there for all of us to see. The Congress can and must bounce back, but it cannot do so under the shadow of a dynasty. Bahadur Shah Zafar learnt this to his cost.

\*\*\*