

Succession struggle

Congress(I) after Rajiv Gandhi

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WHAT will be the fate of the Congress(I) after Rajiv Gandhi? This question is uppermost in the minds of not only Congressmen, but the leaders of practically all other parties. This is because the Congress(I) plays a dominant role in Indian politics even when not in power at the Centre. For the nearly seven years since he was installed Prime Minister after his mother's death in 1984, Rajiv Gandhi had played a high-profile role, in office and out of it, which has made the future of the Congress(I) all the more uncertain.

The bizarre, hasty decision of the party leaders to offer the presidency to Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia, brings out the state of disarray of the party. It is, of course, natural for the Congress(I) to try to cash in on the sympathy wave; going by the experience of the rich harvest it reaped seven years ago when Indira Gandhi was assassinated, one can understand the leaders' anxiety to repeat that performance. For this they need not install Sonia leader of the party. She could have campaigned for the party and would have no doubt evoked widespread sympathy which could be converted into votes for the Congress(I). The move to make her the party president was so astounding that it provoked adverse comments, both at home and abroad. The fact that the party leaders themselves lapsed into squabbling about leadership once Sonia declined, brought out the poor state of health of the Congress(I).

It would, however, be unfair to decry the present leaders for this sorry state of affairs of the party. One has to go back at least 20 years to trace the roots of this crisis. When Indira Gandhi in 1969 split the Congress by walking out of the company of the Syndicate of old party bosses, there was an upsurge of expectation that she would build a democratically functioning party, liberated from the dead grip of the old guard. This feeling was heightened by the enthusiasm generated by her populist programmes beginning with bank nationalisation and abolition of princely privy purse and privileges and on to measures against monopolies in industries and finally to the clarion call of *garibi hatao*.

But there was no effort whatsoever to build a sound party organisation in consonance with the democratic profession of the leaders. At the beginning, the *ad hoc* arrangements were kept pending the elections. But after her spectacular victories in 1971-72, Indira Gandhi just did not bother to build the party. On the plea that she alone knew how to read the pulse of the people, all the promises of democratic party functioning were shelved. It is worth noting that the Congress under Indira Gandhi did not have party elections at all and this continued under Rajiv Gandhi despite his repeated promises of holding them.

The result is that for 22 years, the party has had no internal elections, that is, from the day it was born after the 1969 great split. Orders from the top have throughout been the rule. Whether it is about the composition of Pradesh party committees, and selection of their chiefs or choice of Chief Ministers or State-level ministers, everything has been done by the "party centre," which means the party president.

How fragile such an arrangement can become was seen in the 1970s. The victories of 1971-72 led to complacency which left the party quite unprepared to meet the challenge of mass discontent at growing corruption and maladministration of Congress Ministries. The movement was spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan in Gujarat and later in Bihar. Panic gripped the Con-

gress leadership whose pathetic groveling before the leader was epitomised in the memorable piece of sycophancy: "Indira is India and India is Indira." This panic led Indira Gandhi and her cohorts to clamp Emergency in 1975. When the leadership of the premier political party could not meet the challenge of mass discontent politically, it resorted to authoritarian measures stifling normal political functioning.

It needs to be stated that Indira Gandhi was no anarcho-syndicalist in her outlook. She did rely on some form of political organisation, but this had nothing to do with democratic party functioning. From the very beginning of her prime ministership, she had fostered a ring of loyalists, really a cross between courtiers and advisers. Some members of that kitchen cabinet were highly intelligent people, but they owed no responsibility to either the party or the government. Their standing was by the virtue of the access they had to the Prime Minister and her ear. By the very role it actually came to play, the kitchen cabinet was what can be called an extra-constitutional authority basking under the favour of the supreme leader.

Indira Gandhi, however, did not stick to the same kitchen cabinet throughout. After her setback in the 1967 elections, the kitchen cabinet was sacked and a new set of advisers and operators brought in. *De facto*, they wielded considerable power, but they remained an obstacle to the healthy growth of a democratic party. In course of time, the role of kitchen cabinet was taken over by her son Sanjay Gandhi and his companions and hangers-on to whom Indira Gandhi provided all opportunities, defying party and administrative norms. During the Emergency, Sanjay and Co. virtually took over the Congress and Indira Gandhi backed them enthusiastically and applauded them in public as she did at the Guwahati session of the All India Congress(I) Committee in November 1976.

The 1977 debacle naturally shook the Congress, but it did not help to change Indira Gandhi's outlook in favour of a democratic party set-up. Rather, when there were demands, however feeble, for accountability of the Emergency misdeeds, she walked out in January 1978 to set up her own party, the Congress-Indira. For the first time a political organisation had the name of an individual tagged on to it. She did enlist the services of a number of senior Congress leaders, but the control of the party as such — from its funds to its campaign and even its political strategy — was handled by the Indira-Sanjay combine and their faithful retainers.

After the collapse of the Janata Party Government and when Indira Gandhi returned to power in January 1980, there were talks of building the party. This was entrusted to Sanjay Gandhi and there was no question of democratising it. With Sanjay Gandhi's passing away in an air crash, Indira Gandhi had one more opportunity to rebuild a democratic party. But she did nothing of the kind. Without even caring to consider any senior Congressmen as a replacement for Sanjay, she brought in her other son from outside the political world and openly groomed him as her successor. So, Rajiv Gandhi was brought into Parliament and made party general secretary. Like her kitchen cabinet, she let Rajiv Gandhi set up his "computer brigade," which emerged as the real party centre with the AICC and the Working Committee reduced to mere formalities.

It was, therefore, no surprise that when Indira Gandhi fell to assassins'

bullets on October 31, 1984, Rajiv Gandhi was sworn in Prime Minister by sundown. Even the formality of summoning a meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Party was abandoned. It was almost a conditioned reflex that the son should succeed the mother — the assertion of dynastic rule without any democratic pretence whatsoever. After the spectacular Congress(I) victory in 1984 — the result of a mix of sympathy and concern over the threat to the nation's security — there were expectations that Rajiv Gandhi with his clean-image would rebuild the party. This was reinforced when at the Congress centenary session in Bombay in December 1985, he promised to smash the grip over the Congress(I) of "power-brokers" whom he denounced for having converted "a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy."

Soon, however, the expectations turned out to be illusions as Rajiv Gandhi ran the party in the same way as his mother had done, the only difference was that it had been made more subservient to the leader and the coterie around him. General secretaries were changed almost every new season, making it difficult to keep count. Pradesh committees and Chief Ministers and their ministers were all appointed by the leader without any formal consultations.

When the euphoria over the new Government subsided after two years, and differences cropped up within the royal court, purges were effected without bothering about democratic norms, but purely on the loyalty test — loyalty to the leader and nothing else. The coterie was not answerable to any party body but to the boss and the boss alone. Any expression of dissent, however genuine, was smothered as rebellious. Such absolutism, clothed of course in suave benevolence could not, however, prevent factionalism at various levels; many such groups maintained subterranean links with one section or the other in the royal court.

An important aspect of party functioning is the control of finances. A party of such widespread magnitude has to depend on regular sources of income. Briefly, this aspect of Congress functioning has passed through several stages. Before Independence, it had

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depended on donations; small sums through mass collections and larger ones from the affluent. After Independence, the situation changed in a big way. As the ruling party, the Congress secured the whiphand over the business community, which was made to fill the party coffers and secure, as *quid pro quo*, whatever concessions, permits and licences it could. The business of raising funds, by means both open and devious, was handled by the organisation bosses while the political leaders, by and large, did not get involved in it directly. As a mass party with a democratic appeal, the image of political leaders had to be preserved and could not be allowed to be sullied.

This neat division of labour, however, broke down when the party split in 1969. The organisation bosses were all on the side of the Syndicate; Indira Gandhi's new Congress had to desper-

ately raise funds. Appeal for mass collection was not resorted to. Instead, approaches were made directly to business establishments by the political leaders, including Indira Gandhi herself. The funds raised were kept in the custody of persons enjoying her direct confidence without any reference to the AICC. Over the years, this system was perfected, and one heard of "levies" on business houses at the time of elections. Individual Congress leaders at the State level managed to rope in their own patrons from among local business houses. Inevitably, an element of coercion came in during the Emergency and by the time of the 1977 elections, business houses were choosing their own favourites at many places.

After Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980, a new element came into this business of fund acquisition. There appeared the cutbacks and kickbacks on giant government purchases from abroad whether by the Defence or other departments. Not for nothing did Indira Gandhi make the memorable remark that corruption after all "is a global phenomenon." It is in this category one has to place the alleged kickback from the German submarine deal and perhaps also the Bofors scandal.

One could notice a more systematic arrangement of this department under Rajiv Gandhi. For obvious reasons, the full story of this aspect will not be known for years, if at all, because these have international ramifications as the very preliminary probe into the Bofors deal has amply borne out.

All this forms the background of where the Congress(I) as the premier political organisation stands on the demise of Rajiv Gandhi who wielded imperial authority over it. In an organisation reared on the leadership principle, adhering so long to dynastic succession right at the top, it was but natural that there should be a state of disarray when the emperor disappears suddenly. On one side are the senior party leaders, so long left out of any final authority within the party; and on the other, there is the coterie personally loyal to the departed leader. The senior party leaders are now confronted with the responsibility of leading the party, a job from which they had so long been virtually kept out. With all its depletion of influence and strength, the Congress(I) still continues to be a big prize, and therefore it is but natural there should be tussle among the leaders for capturing it. On the other side, there is the consortium of retainers who will struggle desperately to install the widow of the leader for the purpose of getting control not only of the party and see it through the election but beyond to run the government with her at its head if and when the party comes to power.

After Jawaharlal Nehru's death, the party bosses' Syndicate made Lal Bahadur Shastri the Prime Minister, and when he died, they installed Indira Gandhi, who in turn ditched the Syndicate and established her authority, and then groomed her sons one after the other as her successor. Now, after Rajiv Gandhi, it is inevitable there should be a struggle for succession — between the coterie and the party leaders, and also among the leaders themselves. The ignominious downfall of the party that once led this nation to freedom. ■

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