

THE PRAJA SOCIALIST PARTY
OF INDIA—1952-1972:
A FINAL ASSESSMENT

/ Lewis P. Fickett, Jr.

One of the least publicized results of the 1971 and 1972 Indian General Elections was the all but final demise of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and the crushing defeat administered to its remaining fragment, the Socialist Party of India (SP). When the PSP was formed in September 1952, it ranked as the major opposition party to the dominant Congress. Twenty years later when the results of the state assembly elections of 1972 had been finally counted, the PSP had become defunct for all practical purposes (see Tables 1 and 2).¹

TABLE 1
LOK SABHA RESULTS

		1952	1957	1962	1967	1971
PSP	Seats	21	19	12	13	2
	% Vote	16.4	10.4	6.8	3.1	1.0
SSP	Seats	....	8	6	23	3
	% Vote	....	N.A.*	2.8	4.9	2.4

TABLE 2
STATE ASSEMBLY RESULTS

		1952	1957	1962	1967	1971-72
PSP	Seats	202	208	179	106	12
	% Vote	14.8	9.75	7.6	3.4	N.A.*
SSP/SP	Seats	....	52	29	180	57
	% Vote	....	N.A.*	2.5	5.2	N.A.*

*Not Available.

¹The statistics presented in Tables 1 and 2 have been taken from the official *Reports* published by the Election Commissions for the 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967 Elections. The 1971 and 1972 statistics were obtained from *India News* and the *Times of India*. Figures for 1952 include the totals of both the SP and the KMPP, since the parties were combined in September 1952 into the PSP.

Most of the PSP cadres had long since defected in successive waves to the Congress—approximately one-third in 1964 and one-half of the remaining cadres just before and just after the 1971 Parliamentary election. The remaining PSP faction consolidated with a faction of the former SSP (Samyukta Socialist Party) in August 1971 to become a “new” Socialist Party of India. However, due to subsequent defections and the re-creation of the SSP in early January 1973, this “new” Socialist Party is composed of nothing more than a few powerless fragments in several of the Indian states. The purpose of this study is, therefore, twofold: (1) to analyze the sociological bases of the PSP leadership elite, and (2) to attempt to assess the reasons why the PSP failed.

SOCIOLOGICAL BASES OF THE PSP

During the period July 1967-March 1968, a sociological study of the national leadership elite of the PSP was undertaken.² For the purposes of the selected sample of 40, all the major party officials of the PSP, all its members of Parliament, all members of its national executive, and certain party elder statesmen (such as H. V. Kamath) were included. The results obtained may explain in part why the PSP failed. It had often been said that the PSP was the party of the past in Indian politics. Striking confirmation of this assertion is found in Tables 3 and 4 below.

TABLE 3
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF PSP NATIONAL PARTY LEADERSHIP

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
25-30	0	0
31-40	4	10
41-50	22	55
51-60	8	20
60 and over	6	15

TABLE 4
MOBILIZATION OF PSP NATIONAL PARTY LEADERSHIP

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
1934-1942	9	22.5
1942-1952	18	45
1952-1962	11	27.5
1962-1967	2	5

²For purposes of the sociological study, I personally interviewed the forty major leaders of the PSP, one half hour each. The results of the study were consistent with earlier studies undertaken by W. H. Morris-Jones in his initial study of the Indian Parliament, *Parliament in India* (London), 1957, pp. 121-23.

Another frequent observation concerning the PSP was that it was a party of urban intellectuals which had no base in the rural countryside where the great bulk of India's population resides. Tables 5 and 6 tend to confirm this.

TABLE 5
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF PSP NATIONAL PARTY
LEADERSHIP

<i>Educational Level</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Middle	3	7.5
High School	4	10
Intermediate	3	7.5
Graduate	10	25
Post-graduate	20	50

TABLE 6
OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND OF PSP NATIONAL PARTY
LEADERSHIP

<i>Occupations</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Agriculture	5	12.5
Professions	20	50
Teaching	4	10
Law	8	20
Social Work, Trade Unions	5	12.5
Journalism	1	2.5
Government	2	5
Business	0	0
Full-time Politics	15	37.5

Over four-fifths of the PSP leadership was college-educated, and almost all of this group possessed either a law or other post-graduate degree. Only three party leaders had less than a high school degree. The occupational backgrounds of these party leaders were even more striking. Most (50%) were professional people. None were businessmen. Only five listed agriculture as their occupation, and most of these came from one state, Mysore. The latter, of course, is particularly revealing in a society where over 80% of the people are engaged in agriculture and related pursuits.

Table 7 indicates that the PSP leadership was clearly dominated by the upper castes of Indian society. Only two party leaders came from scheduled castes, and only five from lower castes. What significance did these statistics have for the PSP? It is true that highly educated leaders are needed in any party and that in India up until recent years, the level of education

TABLE 7
CASTE DISTRIBUTION OF PSP NATIONAL PARTY LEADERSHIP

<i>Caste</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Upper Castes	30	75
Brahmin	20	50
Rajput	2	5
Kayastha	2	5
Khatri	2	5
Bania	2	5
Maratha	1	2.5
Jat	1	2.5
Lower Castes	5	12.5
Scheduled Castes	2	5
Moslem	1	2.5
Sikh	1	2.5
Christian	1	2.5

has been strongly correlated with the level of caste. However, as lower caste groups were successively mobilized to participate in the political life of India, the PSP was obviously ill-equipped to compete in a society such as India where politics is not only the politics of caste, but increasingly the politics of lower caste.

THE PSP: A STUDY IN FAILURE

The PSP, which was founded in 1952 as an effective opposition to the dominant Congress Party, has now disintegrated. There appear to have been several explanations for this phenomenon: (1) ineffective leadership, (2) the success of the Congress Party in pre-empting socialist ideology and in co-opting socialist cadres, (3) the inability of the Socialists to merge again following the 1955 split, and (4) the sociological composition of the PSP elite, which was inadequate for the purpose of mobilizing the Indian masses. Acute organizational weaknesses and bitter factional quarrels have been merely symptoms of the deeper maladies mentioned above.

The principal weakness of the Socialists has been their ineffective leadership. The great Socialist leaders—Jayaprakash Narayan, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, J. B. Kripalani, and Asoka Mehta—all tended to be *prima donnas*, each espousing his own kind of political salvation, each indulging in the fruitless ideological abstractions so characteristic of Indian intellectual politicians and each unwilling to compromise with the others. Consequently, over a period of time, these leaders have all renounced, defected, or been expelled from the Party, each time leaving it a little weaker by taking with them their loyal supporters.

Many state-level PSP leaders proved to be as ineffective and undependable as the national leaders. Over the years, a steady stream of state PSP notables defected to the Congress. These local defectors have included T. Prakasam in Andhra Pradesh, P. T. Pillai in Kerala, P. C. Ghosh in West Bengal, M. Prasad Sinha in Bihar, Triloki Singh in Uttar Pradesh and countless others. The net effect of these many and varied defections was to leave the PSP bereft of effective leadership at all levels.

Another major reason for the gradual fragmentation of the PSP was the continuing success of the Congress Party over time in pre-empting socialist ideology and in co-opting socialist cadres.³ At the Avadi Conference of the Congress Party in 1955 the die was clearly cast. It was here that a united Congress Party committed itself to the "establishment of a socialistic pattern of society." At the Nagpur Conference of the Congress in 1959, a cooperative joint farming program was proposed. Finally, at Bhubaneswar in 1964, the dying Nehru succeeded in once again securing Congress Party lip-service for socialist objectives. Socialist ideology went into a temporary eclipse, however, when Nehru was succeeded as Prime Minister by the tradition-bound Lal Bahadur Shastri in June 1964.

It was only after the disastrous general election of 1967 that the Congress, now under Mrs. Gandhi's guidance, started to move leftward again. Prodded by the "Young Turks," the All India Congress Committee (AICC) approved in June 1967 the controversial Ten Point Program which proposed a whole series of democratic socialist reforms such as bank nationalization, state trading, and abolition of privy purses (pensions) for the princes. All of these issues smouldered until the summer of 1969.

Having failed to obtain the Congress Party's presidential nomination for her friend, the left-leaning V. V. Giri, Mrs. Gandhi struck back by ordering bank nationalization and removing the Right-Wing Congress leader Morarji Desai from the post of Finance Minister. Finally, she succeeded in securing Mr. Giri's election as Indian President. These developments precipitated the split in the Congress Party in November 1969 and the sharp leftward shift of Mrs. Gandhi's Ruling Congress.

After surviving a year with a minority in the Parliament thanks to the support on most issues of the Left and Regional parties, Mrs. Gandhi, on December 25, 1970, called for an early election. During the course of her election campaign, she began to appeal to the Indian electorate on several democratic socialist issues—bank nationalization (which had meanwhile been declared unconstitutional by the Indian Supreme Court), the abolition of pensions for the Indian princes, nationalization of general insurance, the imposition of ceilings on urban property holdings, and more effective implementation of loophole-ridden land reform legislation. The result of this leftward thrust was that, as her father had before her, Mrs. Gandhi effectively pre-empted

³See Lewis P. Fickett, Jr., "Socialism in Indian Party Politics," *Asian Forum*, March 1972, for a study of the pre-emption of socialist ideology by the Congress Party.

the traditional socialist position on the Indian political spectrum. As a consequence, the PSP call for a "radical socialist alternative" fell on deaf ears among the Indian voters.

The Congress Party was simultaneously successful over the years in the gradual co-option and absorption of both the leadership and membership of the socialist parties of India. As Subhash C. Kashyap has already pointed out, the PSP was the primary victim of this co-option process, and it indeed suffered more defections than any other Indian political party.⁴ Although this defection process has been almost continuous, there were two major periods of defections from the PSP to the Congress. The first came in the summer of 1964 when Asoka Mehta left the PSP with his supporters, taking with him an estimated one-third of PSP cadres at that time. The other major defection took place just before and after the 1971 Parliamentary Election. At those times, more than half of the existing PSP cadres joined the Congress. With many other PSP leaders merging with the SSP in the summer of 1971 to form a "new" Socialist Party there was little left of the original PSP.

Still another important explanation for the failure of the PSP was its continuing inability to achieve unity with the SSP following the split in 1955. There were, it will be remembered, eight unsuccessful attempts to bring about a merger of the socialist parties. Several factors played a role in this failure. The basic issue underlying the split was what relationship the Socialists should have with the Congress. This was the issue which sharply divided the Socialists from the inception of the PSP to its very end.

Another major difference between the Socialists was regarding the concept of preferential treatment for the backward classes of Indian society. The SSP insisted upon a 60% reservation for these groups. The PSP opposed a rigid percentage approach. The language question also kept the Socialists apart. The SSP, reflecting its North Indian base, took a very hard line in favor of an unconditional acceptance of the Hindi language. While agreeing that Hindi should be the national language, the PSP opposed the imposition of Hindi on unwilling regions of the country.

There also were major differences between the parties in regard to tactics. The PSP placed primary reliance on the legislative forum as a means of accomplishing social change. The SSP believed in the militant employment of agitation to bring about change. In fact, no Indian political party indulged in as many and as varied agitations as the SSP. Finally, in reviewing the failure to achieve Socialist unity in India, one must not forget the never-ending clash of strong personalities such as Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia and Asoka Mehta within the Socialist Movement. Particularly is this the case in a society in which the smaller political parties tend to be little more than clusters of supporters arrayed around a few charismatic leaders.

⁴Subhash C. Kashyap, "The Politics of Defection: The Changing Contours of the Political Power Structure in State Politics in India," *Asian Survey*, March 1970, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 195-208.

Perhaps the most basic explanation for the disintegration of the PSP was the sociological composition of the party elite. As previously shown, the PSP party elite was clearly high caste, highly educated, and highly urbanized. The result of this was that the party, among other considerations, responded only reluctantly to the demand of a predetermined degree of representation for the underprivileged groups in Indian society (backward castes, tribals, women). Thus, the PSP, unlike its more militant offspring, the SSP, neglected a considerable portion of its natural constituency.

In essence, the failure of the PSP lay in the nature of Indian society and the party's failure, or inability, to accommodate to the realities of that society. The PSP was a party of Westernized intellectuals who acted and preferred to act in terms of Western idioms. Inevitably, therefore, the party seemed to operate almost solely on the thin top layer of the Indian body politic. That meant that it faced almost insuperable tasks in reaching and mobilizing the vast Indian masses to whom Western ways and the English language are great unknowns. In one sense, it might be said that the disintegration of the PSP was due simply to the failure of the party to respond to this fundamental political challenge.

LEWIS P. FICKETT, JR., is Professor of Political Science at Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia.