

Congress: Internal discord, outside expectations

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Internal discord in the party has intensified after Congress's dismal performance in the five assembly elections held in February-March 2022. Political pundits, leaders of other parties and politically aware citizens are questioning the role of the Congress for future politics. Among those who put in question there are many people who have reasonable expectations from the Congress as an all-India political party. The two issues - internal discord and the role of the Congress in future politics - are intertwined. Given the Congress's post-Nehru-era history, it seems unlikely that the party would try to stand on its own feet by abandoning the Gandhi family. Even after these election results, if the Congress does not become family-free, then Narendra Modi will further intensify his 'mission' of Congress-free India. Aam Admi Party (AAP) will also intensify its race to scavenge the remaining flesh in the vast skeleton of the Congress. In fact, full of enthusiasm due to the overwhelming victory in Punjab, it has already started its ventures in that direction. The position of those non-NDA leaders who wanted a coalition of regional parties led by the Congress for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, would now be further weakened.

Today's Congress clearly lacks the leadership capability and organizational strength needed to reposition it at the first place in the politics of a country with a vast and complex socio-political-cultural structure like India. Congress leaders even today seem to dwell in the old presumption that the family and the party have a birthright to rule the country and that the power will somehow turn around and come to the Congress only.

Even after the severe defeats of 2014 and 2019, Congress leaders and workers are not ready to work assiduously for the party organization. Whatever their age, they are primarily engaged in the competition of showing their loyalty to the family. No one is ready to be second in this race. Leaders like Ashwani Kumar, who left the party and now shared the knowledge, have also been receiving the gift of loyalty to the family. This has once again become clear from the meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) held soon after the assembly election results.

The Congress high command and its loyalists live in the hope of miracles by kneejerk reactions on different occasions. If the results of five assembly elections had turned in favor of the Congress, all credit would have been given to the high command, and the current group of loyalists would have attacked the dissidents in a bitter manner. The disgruntled leaders of Group 23 also happened to be 'Sonia Loyalists'. In the absence of power for a long time, they only know how to complain. They have neither the training nor the will to do political work on the ground even the party is not in power. Hence, the degeneration of the Congress continues. The fall of Congress is one of the main reasons behind the expansion of the two far-right political parties - the BJP and AAP - whose politics relies on the strength of a corporate-communal nexus. It may be noted here that since the anti-corruption movement and consequent formation of AAP, there

has been no major infiltration of AAP into the regional parties in spite maneuverings by its leadership.

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With the introduction of the New Economic Policies (NEP) in 1991, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the corporate-communal nexus started gaining roots as the basis of Indian politics at a rapid speed. The new or alternative politics has not been able to garner enough strength to challenge that trend in the country. However, two socialist leaders - Kishan Patnaik outside the mainstream politics and Chandrashekhar within the mainstream politics - made efforts to create and strengthen an alternative politics based on the values of the Constitution and socialism against the politics of corporate-communal nexus. That stream of the efforts for alternative politics remained active, and even effective to some extent for a long time. The dynamism of the stream of alternative politics was the main reason behind the defeat of the Vajpayee government in 2004 which, riding on the horse of corporate-communal nexus, made its campaign with the hype of 'Shining India'.

But the 'secular soldiers of Sonia' declared that verdict of the people of India against neoliberal policies as a miracle of Sonia Gandhi's charisma. Manmohan Singh, being a risk-free person for the future of Rahul Gandhi, may have been Sonia Gandhi's choice for the post of Prime Minister within the party, was also a choice of the external powers like the World Bank. Just as Vajpayee did not disappoint Manmohan Singh, the mentor of NEP, on the path of corporate capitalism, Manmohan Singh too, by placing the political economy of India firmly on the axis of WB, IMF, WTO, WEF etc., did not disappoint Vajpayee who had accelerated Manmohan Singh's dream project during his 6 years tenure. Meanwhile, a major part of the alternative politics which emerged in opposition to corporate capitalism died after being trapped in the maze of anti-corruption movement.

The Congress happened to be number one party of the country till 2014, despite its split into Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Trinamool Congress. After the congress' humiliating defeat in 2014 Lok Sabha elections the BJP and AAP have been promoting themselves by enrolling Congress's leaders/workers/voters while simultaneously cursing it. Disenchanted by the future of the party some Congress leaders have also joined Trinamool Congress. Whether Congress remains in the possession of the family, or decides to develop a decentralized and collective leadership by restoring internal democracy in the party, in both cases it will compete with the BJP on about 200 seats as a national party in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. This is an important fact which should not be ignored. Most of these seats are currently with the BJP. The Congress's fight on these seats is certain, but victory will depend on how it settles its internal discord.

As stated above, the issue of internal discord within the Congress has to do with the expectations of those outside the party. If the high command will consider the expectations to be made from the Congress party in the first place, then it will have to give up its intention to keep its hold on the party. One way to strengthen the Congress could be that Nationalist Congress Party and Trinamool Congress should return to the Congress fold. If this happens, then the leaders and

workers who have gone from Congress to the BJP and AAP can also return. With this, the fragmentation in the Congress can be checked for the future. In such a situation, the Congress-led UPA can give a tough fight to the BJP-led NDA in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

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Congress leaders often talk about the ideology of the Congress against RSS/BJP. However their claim does not hold any merit. Why can't Congress leaders like Shashi Tharoor, who repeatedly talk about the 'Idea of India' against the BJP, see that the platform of corporate capitalism has been provided by the Congress to the BJP. Those in the Congress who advocate providing a level playing field for all capitalists in place of the crony capitalism of the BJP, do not know that the Indian Constitution is not made to implement the capitalist system. Rather it provides a level playing field to all the citizens of India for their all-round development.

In 1991, when Dr. Manmohan Singh, as finance minister, implemented the NEP under Narasimha Rao's prime ministership, BJP's top leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee had said that the Congress has done the work of the BJP. Even in the matter of communalism, the present day Congress stands with the BJP, not the Constitution. That is, it follows the big line of communalism of the RSS/BJP in a different form. Rahul Gandhi has repeatedly said that he is not against privatization/disinvestment. P Chidambaram, who was finance minister in UPA, also repeatedly instructed that instead of spending money on populist schemes, the pace of economic reforms should be accelerated. Once prime minister Manmohan Singh quoted Nehru in favor of NEP in Parliament. Chandrashekhar interrupted him and said that it would not be proper to quote Nehru in favor of capitalism. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, while addressing the US Congress, pleaded that they are building the India of Gandhi's dreams. Narendra Modi's new or corporate India is also said to be the India of Gandhi's dreams. In such a situation, it becomes redundant to talk about the ideology of the Congress apart from the RSS/BJP.

Congress should seriously consider the issue of ideology. Ideologically, it has not been an alternative to the BJP. Rather, the BJP has become an alternative to the Congress incarnated in 1991. The Congress can be an alternative to the BJP on the strength of a perfect organization and perfect and distinct ideology. A perfect organization would be achieved by establishing internal democracy in the party, and perfect ideology would be achieved by the sincere assimilation of the Constitution.

Even after 30 years of experience of neo-liberalism, if the Congress believes that it is right to continue the process of privatization-disinvestment by setting aside the Constitution, then it should tell how it differs from the BJP on this path. At the same time, it should also tell how the line of soft communalism of the Congress is appropriate to fight against the fierce communalism of the RSS/BJP. The matter of Hinduism should be allowed to be taken care of by the people of that religion. It is not the job of any Congress leader to tell what is Hinduism?

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It is not a hidden fact that the BJP and AAP play an open game of corporate-communal nexus. There is no dearth of their supporters in the country and abroad. Most of the progressive and secular intellectuals of the country attack the BJP fiercely, but remain in support of AAP. In fact, this party has been their loving gift to the people of India. The Congress wants to play the game of corporate-communal nexus in a secret manner. There is a saying in the countryside, 'Jaggery cannot be broken in the kulhia' i.e. a task cannot be performed stealthily. Either Congress plays that game openly like the BJP and AAP or creates its own playing field and rules of the game. It shouldn't be a difficult task for the 'Grand Old Party'.

The churning in the Congress should be on the question of ideology as well along with the party leadership and organization. Ideology happens to be more important than leadership in any political party. Those who talk of ideology-lessness or the end of ideology, have actually accepted corporate capitalism as an ultimate ideology. Further they want to impose dictatorship of that very ideology. In the context of India such people are anti-Constitution. If the progressive and secular intellectuals of the country also brainstorm on the question of ideology, then it can help the Congress and other political parties. Then the tightening of the corporate-communal nexus on the politics of the country may loosen to some extent. But the problem is that even the pro-Congress intellectuals feel burdened by the "sluggishness" and "oldness" of the Congress against the "fastness" and "freshness" of the BJP and the AAP.

Ultimately the Congress has to decide. It is to be hoped that the Congress will settle the discord within the party in such a way that the expectations outside the party are met to a large extent.

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