

Rahul Gandhi can drive Mandal 3, reverse social justice politics that BJP pushed to dead-end.

Rahul Gandhi's Kolar speech wasn't a momentary reflex. Congress is looking to recover lost ground and be the favourite party of poor, Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims again.

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Does Rahul Gandhi's speech at Kolar in Karnataka signal a new turn in the politics of social justice? Congress missed the Mandal bus. It was an uneasy passenger in Mandal-2. Is the Congress now going to be the driver of Mandal-3? Is the country prepared for this turn? Is the Congress prepared for this swerve?

You might think that I am hanging too many clothes on a thin wire. After all, this was one election speech. The 'anti-OBC' accusation levelled at him in the Modi surname controversy incensed him. He flipped it around and turned the tables on the BJP, asking it hard questions about its commitment to OBCs. Gandhi wondered why only 7 secretary level officers come from SC/ST/OBCs. He asked the BJP why it was running away from caste census (I have already written on this and also on why caste census is necessary, so will not repeat this here) and not releasing the data of the survey done in 2011. And he demanded the removal of the 50 per cent cap on reservations. Is this anything more than a clever, though rare, retort here?

You would be mistaken. Notice Rahul Gandhi's body language when he said that. It showed a deep resolve. It is no secret that he takes Dr BR Ambedkar's ideas and Kanshi Ram's politics more seriously than most leaders in our country, including those in the BSP. Notice the fact that all the points that he made in the speech (except removing the 50 per cent cap) were already part of the Congress plenary resolutions at Raipur, Chhattisgarh, in February. The resolutions give us a glimpse of what is to come. Finally, notice the letter that Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge shot off to PM Narendra Modi the very next day, reiterating Rahul's demand.

Gaining lost ground

Kolar speech was clearly not a momentary reflex. Congress is on to something big here. The party is attempting to recover the lost ground of social justice. Congress used to be the favourite party of the poor, Dalit, Adivasi, and religious minorities. They still vote Congress more than other sections do. Yet the leadership, policies and programmes of the Congress party ceased to reflect this ground reality. This is what Rahul Gandhi seeks to correct.

This is not going to be easy. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus reminded us, you cannot step into the same river twice. Politics of social justice is not what it used to be in the 1990s. And the Congress cannot do today what it could have done three decades ago. Congress needs to think its priorities and strategy afresh to respond to the new challenges to the policies and politics of social justice.

The starting point of this rethink has to be the recognition that policies and politics of social justice hit a dead-end long ago. That is why they are an easy prey to ideological and political appropriation by the BJP. I noted this more than a decade ago in an audit of the politics and policies of social justice. (Those days my fleeting election forecasts were taken more seriously than the serious stuff that I wrote). I noted that social justice had turned into a thin foil that could be used to wrap virtually any substance. Social justice was more about representation to social groups and less about redressing disadvantages, deprivation and discrimination that characterised the caste system. This was linked to a steep decline in the very imagination of social justice.

The signs of having reached a dead-end are there for everyone to see. First, there is electoral and political stagnation if not decline of parties like BSP, SP and RJD that represent social justice in the Hindi heartland. Second, the advocacy of social justice has faced fragmentation in that the issues of Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs, and Muslims are articulated in isolation, if not in opposition, to one another. Third, proponents of social justice are ideologically defensive where they don't need to, for instance, on caste census. Fourth, in such a state of siege, they are in denial of the challenges that they face from within, for instance on the issue of sub-quota. All this allows, finally, a subversion of the architecture of social justice through moves like the EWS quota.

Kickstart a reversal

In politics you don't stand at the dead end for too long. Someone comes and pushes you where you did not want to go. Or walks away with your valuables. That is precisely what the BJP has done to the politics of social justice through devious but dynamic strategies of selective accommodation of leaders, powerful appropriation of symbols, and micro targeting of smaller and sub-communities within the Bahujans.

This is the challenge that the Congress faces today. A reversal of this sorry state of affairs would take a careful rethink of the theory and practice of policies and politics of social justice. Here are four concrete ideas to kick-start this thinking.

First of all, the Congress must focus on recovering lost spaces and claiming new spaces for social justice. Today the imagination of social justice is limited to the state and the public sector that are rapidly shrinking. While there are some areas within the public sector that need to be reclaimed – the Raipur resolution rightly talks about SC-ST-OBC representation in the higher judiciary – the focus today has to be on the representation in the non-government sectors like the media and the NGO. Raipur resolution has rightly started the discussion on equal access to jobs in the private sector.

Second, the Congress must openly embrace the idea of refining the target groups for policies of affirmative action as long as the benefits of better targeting go to the designated groups. Let's face it: 70 years of the practice of reservations has created its own vested interest that resists further percolation of the benefits of this policy. They have captured Mandal politics. Congress must challenge this by endorsing the idea of sub-quota within SC, ST, and OBC, as long as the vacancies are not transferred to the general pool. Similarly, it should back the idea that families and communities that have availed benefits of quota should be placed at the bottom of the queue.

Third, sooner or later, it must be open to finding new ways of achieving social justice so that affirmative action is not reduced just to caste-based reservations. Our society is marked by multiple, overlapping, cross-cutting and graded inequalities that cannot be captured by only one dimension like caste or class or gender. Gradually, we must revise the criteria of affirmative action's one-dimensional emphasis on caste. We must also find smart ways to redesign the mechanism of affirmative action so as to expand its repertoire beyond reservations. Mechanisms like deprivation index-based weightage, incentives and disincentives for the private sector, and a system of strong disclosure requirements need political backing.

Fourth, social justice policies require refurbishing its institutional set-up. The Raipur resolution has proposed a separate ministry for the OBCs and a National Social Justice Council. More importantly, it proposes an Annual Social Justice Report to be placed and discussed in Parliament. Smarter mechanisms like this need greater attention. So does the idea of an Equal Opportunity Commission backed by legislation prevalent in many parts of the world, an idea proposed by a committee during the UPA. [I was a member of that committee]

As Rahul Gandhi takes his Kolar speech forward, he might discover that missing the Mandal bus may now be an advantage for the Congress. Unlike all other champions of social justice, his party is not tied to powerful land-owning OBCs that may block any deepening and fine-tuning of social justice policies. The BJP has already cleared the ground by challenging the entrenched leadership within Dalits and Adivasis and thus making a radical reshuffle possible. He might discover that in politics, weakness can be a source of strength, small can sometimes be beautiful.