

The State of the Congress

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The impact of Pandit Nehru's personality on the ideological transformation of the Congress can be easily exaggerated; so also his contribution to its unity. No doubt, the Prime Ministers popularity with the Indian people and his intuitive knowledge of the aspirations of the masses endear him to Congressmen and make him indispensable.

But there is no indication that a less colourful personality would not command the same loyalty in the party if he could disarm the Opposition with equal anticipation; nor is there any definite indication that socialism would not have been accepted as the goal but for Pandit Nehru's persuasion.

POLITICAL assessment by the leftists of the role and potentialities of the Congress Party had for long, and until the very recent past been utterly devoid of realism. This failure to understand the Congress is best indicated by the ideological confusion as also confusion regarding the 'tactical line' that have marked the policies of the Communist and Socialist Parties in the last five years.

That this confusion has, in its turn, led to acute controversies and dissensions the Praja Socialist Party's strength has been depleted by the exit of Socialists of the Lohia school of thought and the Communist Party Congress at Palghat was reported to have been divided between the Right and the Left is an admission of the failure to size up the Congress Party correctly. The criteria used for such an estimate had failed, it appears in retrospect, to rise above the Marxist method of interpretation of men and matters, totally disregarding the impact of the tradition of India's national movement on political life after freedom and adopting a 'black-and-white' approach which Indian history—ancient and modern—has persistently defied.

Monopoly of Power

The election manifesto of the Communist Party declared in 1951 that the Government of the day was one of 'national betrayal', of 'landlords and monopolists' and of collaborators with 'British and American imperialism'. The first speech a Communist made in India's Parliament characterised the President's Address as 'a declaration of war on the people of India'. The Socialist Party used less violent language, but conveyed the same idea when it confidently said, "In four years of power the Congress has been metamorphosed into a Conservative Party".

Even the most militant left-winger in India now would have better things to say of the Congress Party. The main accent of Socialist opposition today is on the political dan-

ger that the Congress monopoly of power represents. The Communist Party has accepted for quite some time that India's foreign policy is independent of any control or influence and that the Second Five Year Plan represents an advance which it had not expected from this Government. More reasoned interpreters of the 'class content' of parties and politics distinguished economists from the U S S R and Eastern Europe—have gone to the extent of virtually justifying India's Second Plan as representing the correct Marxist strategy for a country like India.

Yet, all this change is not so much the result of a failure to see as of a failure to foresee. At a particular point of time, the leftist description of the Congress Party would not look so ridiculously untrue as it looks over a period of time. In other words, what has never been correctly explained by the Socialists' technique of evaluation is the flexibility of the Congress Party. It will not be totally incorrect to say that the greatest optimist about the Congress would not have predicted in 1950 that it would, in five years, accept 'socialism', however vague, as its objective, that it would nationalise the Imperial Bank, amend the property rights granted by the Constitution, start state trading and envisage a large-scale expansion of the public sector. All this, however, has happened, and happened without the slightest indication of disappointment even in a small minority group inside the Party. This stupendous flexibility of the Congress Party has baffled the interpreters. Nobody can now say that the Congress will move thus far and no further.

More Plausible Terms

Now that this flexibility has been established beyond doubt, it has to be explained in terms more plausible than the 'class content' of the Congress Party alone. Not that class content is of no use in analysing the Congress Party; in fact, one must

begin an objective analysis of the Congress with the admission that by and large the overwhelming majority of Congressmen represent the same economic class from which the leadership of all the other parties are drawn. In the wake of India's struggle for freedom there came into the Congress the lower and upper middle class intelligentsia who later got divided, irrespective of their origin, into ideological groups of Socialists, Communists, Gandhians and non-attached Congressmen with a pragmatic approach. The ideological inspiration for the latter was primarily nationalistic before freedom was achieved. While the other three groups had developed an attitude of aversion to power till they could have their own way, the last-mentioned category of Congressmen—and to this belonged the large majority of them—would get into, and remain in, power without any particular ideal to serve.

The power that Congressmen had enjoyed even in British days in various capacities, as members of local bodies, legislative assemblies and Cabinets in some States, had helped the growth of this psychology. Although this could not influence the large majority of Congressmen, they too developed a consciousness that they would enjoy fuller power and authority as soon as the British departed. Again, the prolonged struggle for freedom ended only when signs of weariness appeared on the foreheads of Congressmen and a period of relaxation was called for. Thus when Independence did come, three trends became immediately noticeable in the Congress. One of them was the growing impatience of the relatively younger generation with a broad heterogeneous national organisation that had no clearly-defined ideology. This ultimately led to a large-scale exodus by Communist and Socialist elements. Secondly, a large number of weary fighters for freedom got frustrated over the non-recognition of their contribution, and, instead

of forming organised groups decided to retire from the scene or depoliticise themselves. Meanwhile, the majority remained firm to share responsibility and enjoy power.

Irreconcilable Features

This third category is the Congress Party of today, a party, largely, of what might be called professional politicians. Although this characterisation does not embrace the Party's top leadership, it is the predominance of professional politicians in the ranks that explains the many irreconcilable features to be seen in the ruling Party. These politicians have no vested interest as such except their own, in power. In fact, apart from the prestige that goes with power, they have little to call their own, and a large number of them look forward to membership of legislative bodies, if not of cabinets, for a comfortable living. The number of people in the Congress who can afford to lose an election is limited. They cannot cut themselves from the main trend of opinion in the country even if it means compromising certain values they had once considered fundamental.

This desire to get into, and remain in, power leads to two apparently contradictory features which have marked Congress history in recent times. One of them is the remarkable ease and unanimity with which any policy decision advocated by the leadership is accepted. It is considered the shortest cut to votes, and none would burn his boats with the High Command. There has been no great debate in the Congress on any policy resolutions. Foreign policy has not given rise to any controversy: an indictment of the Soviet Union in Hungary can be as easily stomached as a justification of it. Vital economic policy decisions have been taken in a matter of hours.

No Dissent

The Socialist objective was accepted without any vote of dissent. Far-reaching changes have been accepted without any serious flutter. Only four A I C C delegates voted against the dethronement of Congress President Tandon, whom they had earlier voted to office by a comfortable majority.

This remarkable picture of unity and strength, however, is marred with regularity before every General Election—a feature which can again be explained in terms of the professional character of the Congress politician. He can swallow socialism or anything that comes

from the High Command, but not the candidate chosen by it, if it happens to be someone who does not hold out any immediate prospect to him. What has now taken place on a minor scale in Bihar, Mysore and other States represents the essence of this problem in the Congress Party. It will certainly be repeated on a much larger scale and in almost every State if any party of the Opposition can offer a seat and a reasonable chance of success to aspirants at the polls. If the large majority of disappointed Congressmen do not revolt and prefer to wait for another five years, it is because of the feeling that even after five years, no Opposition party might be in a position to deliver the goods.

Interesting Corollaries

This analysis leads to certain interesting corollaries. One of them is that, the impact of Pandit Nehru's personality on the ideological transformation of the Congress can be easily exaggerated; so also his contribution to its unity. No doubt, the Prime Minister's popularity with the Indian people and his intuitive knowledge of the aspirations of the masses endear him to Congressmen and make him indispensable. But there is no indication that a less colourful personality would not command the same loyalty in the Party if he could disarm the Opposition with equal anticipation; nor is there any definite indication that socialism would not have been accepted as the goal but for Pandit Nehru's persuasion.

Secondly, the degree of unity in the Congress Party is a function, among other things, of the popularity of the Opposition parties. If the Opposition can ever get the Congress on the wrong foot so far as the electoral psychology is concerned, this unity may prove to be short-lived. Should the Congress leadership ever estrange public opinion in this country to the extent Sir Anthony Eden did in Britain, the Indian Anthony Nuttings would far outnumber the Selwyn Lloyds.

Thirdly, this brings into sharp relief the importance of a leftwing Opposition in India. While its chances at the polls never induced the Congressman to risk a break with the parent body (except in the case of Acharya Kripalani and his few followers in the K M P P), the fact that the only opposition worth its name in the country is from the radical left has helped the Socialist

orientation of Congress policies to a very large extent.

A Comparison

In fact, it may be worthwhile to compare here the political scene in India and Pakistan. In the latter, the post-Independence years were marked by lack of encouragement, in general, to, and virtual persecution, in specific cases, of, socialist and liberal elements with the result that the right-wing Mullahs became the only vehicle of articulate expression for public discontent. The Muslim League as a result moved more and more to the right, giving rise to an unstable political situation in the country. Here, even in the worst days of Communist adventure, the party was not banned excepting in the few most hardly-affected States. The socialists worked freely, and were often encouraged by the Prime Minister's admonition of his own party and declared preference for comrades who had left. In fact, if Jawaharlal Nehru has vitally affected Congress policies, it is in his round about way of allowing free play to left forces, of lending respectability to them and of concentrating his ideological attacks mostly on the parties of the right.

Before concluding, mention may be made of an interesting idea in the P S P's election manifesto which the Congress might borrow for the sake of its own organisation strength, if not on merits alone. A complete reorganisation of the administration at the lower levels, from the district downwards, might be of tremendous help. Apart from the fact that in a centrally-planned economy with inevitable expansion of the bureaucrat's authority it would be worthwhile to establish democratic machinery at every level from the district downwards to the village panchayat as a check against the evils of State Capitalism, the manning of such institutions will re-deploy a large number of 'professional politicians' and retain them as assets and not liabilities to the Congress Party.

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