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## Congress cannot Survive without Gandhi Family



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The Indian National Congress as a political party in India's pre-independence and post-independence politics played a significant role in terms of mass aspirations regarding freedom, justice and equality. It constructed and deconstructed many narratives revolving around socio-political issues and concerns. Though it began its political journey as an elite organization, gradually it involved many people belonging to different social backgrounds and became a well-accepted mass organization. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Congress was a democratic project during India's struggle against colonial rule to experiment with and get trained in political concepts such as liberty, equality and justice. The project was continued after independence but paused for a moment due to undemocratic tendencies of the leadership. This pause should be objectively evaluated because the very leadership which imposed Emergency in the country was also responsible for making strong the social and economic democracy.

The Congress as a democratic project received visionary support from Jawaharlal Nehru immediately after independence that was much required for a new born nation which had several socio-economic problems. Along with tackling the challenges from socio-economic front, he also succeeded in tackling the political issues. Democratic elections and constitutional institutions received great support from the party leadership both at national and state level to nurture and protect the democratic spirit of India's struggle for freedom.

After Nehru, for almost three decades the party's leadership came under the control of his daughter Indira Gandhi and later his grandson Rajiv Gandhi. As it is well documented, this period had both positive and negative features associated with the functioning of the party in India's democratic politics. The positive aspect of this period was successful emergence of backward class leadership in the party. To give an example, due to the support of Indira Gandhi, backward class leaders like Devaraj Urs dismantled the politics of dominant communities in Karnataka. Ultimately, it resulted in social churning in state politics. This was also a period of beginning of non-Congress rule at national

level. Overall, the non-Congress rule at union level did not make much difference in terms of its capacity as an alternative to the Congress. Both Janata Party and Janata Dal experiments at the Centre could not complete their term in office and became unsuccessful in providing alternative politics to the nation. Subsequently Certain political developments revolving around community identities became responsible for emergence of Bharatiya Janata Party as one of the alternatives for the Congress at national level.

Sonia Gandhi took over the leadership of the party when it was deeply in crisis mainly caused by narrower interests and weak leadership which did not have the capacity to act as an umbrella leader for all sections of the leaders within the party. It was a time when people were discussing in the public domain that the future of the party has come to an end. Sonia Gandhi gave new direction to the party and galvanized it to face the instability caused by the ruling party in all fronts. Of course, the senior leaders of the party stood with her as great support in galvanizing the party which was under insecurity in terms its political survival. The role of Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi also cannot be underestimated.

Is there any other leader and the family who can give capable and sustaining leadership to the party? It is difficult to answer the question, given the political fluidity in the country. To curb the nepotism of dominant communities, India needs overarching national leadership which can only be provided by the Gandhi family and not by any others. It looks very simplistic, but the reality is that the leaders in the party are not ready to become mature in terms of showing their capability to provide national leadership. Most of the leaders are confined to their citadels. Absolutely, there is no effort to go beyond fixed citadels like caste, religion and region. To preserve the plural character of the society, it needs leaders who can be secular, egalitarian and at a times self-sacrificing. This can be found in the Gandhi family. Some senior leaders in the party may be having intellectual capacity to deliberate political

issues systematically but do not have national appeal to receive wider support from different communities and regions.

Intellectuals have been making effort to energize the party in the form of providing suggestions to withstand the political onslaught of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Issues discussed in the opinion articles written by the intellectuals range from internal democratization to change in the party leadership. Sometimes even borrowing the leaders from other parties was also suggested. But comparatively, the Congress party is the one party which has been successively conducting organizational elections. There may be some flaws but can be rectified, if visionary democratic ideas are willingly followed. This is possible because the Gandhi family is not averse to such ideas if situation arises. Nation has twice witnessed such visionary decisions when Sonia Gandhi did not accept the Prime Ministership and made Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister. This action was not only an action of self-sacrifice but also visionary thinking on the part of the Gandhi family to recognize leadership with honesty, intellect and integrity for the greater cause.

The coalition of leaders and parties like Sharad Pawar of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Mamata Banerjee of Trinamool Congress (TMC), K. Chandrashekar Rao of Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy of the Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), and M.K. Stalin of Dravida Munnetra Kazhgam (DMK) could be made reality with the support of the Congress Party. It is difficult to realize the unity but it is high time for all the concerned parties and leaders to introspect about state of the democracy in the country and come together on a single platform to oppose anti-national ideas of the parties which do not have any respect to the struggle and sacrifice made by the leaders during India's struggle against colonialism. Such unity would also help in curbing the tendencies of neo-colonialism by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the name of cultural nationalism. Otherwise, future

generation of the plural India would not forget the possible grave mistakes committed by the ideologically like-minded parties which profess secularism, pluralism and egalitarianism. The Congress under the leadership of Gandhi family can bring the non-BJP parties to a joint platform easily because of certain reasons. Leaders of the parties like NCP, TMC, TRS, and YSRCP were once connected with the Congress party. Their departure from the party was purely on certain issues but not fundamental ideological principles. The ideological principles and practices among these parties could facilitate them to come together. DMK under the leadership of M.K. Stalin has natural tendency of moving closer to the Congress due to the similarities between both parties on questions like true federalism, secularism and progressive politics.

Of course, Communist Parties of India can also play an important role in forging the non-BJP political platform at national level. The strong presence of both the Communist parties and the Congress in states like Kerala may put them in trouble in electoral politics because of ideological differences. The problem of joint fight by the Communist parties and the Congress against the BJP can be managed by proportional seat sharing during elections, especially elections for Lok Sabha. Such understanding is required to prevent the divisive political forces to polarize the voters on the basis of divisive agendas. For Assembly elections, they can fight individually on the basis of pro-people socio-economic programmes. Ideally speaking, the competition between and among the political parties should be such that they should seek mandate for governance on the basis of inclusive performance for benefit of all the sections of the society.

The political understanding between the Communist parties and Congress for larger unity can be realized only through Gandhi family leadership. To substantiate this argument, it is better to state the kind of political maturity shown by Sonia Gandhi during the rule of the governments led by United Progressive Alliance

(UPA) I and II. It was during this period that the country witnessed several progressive policies. All this had to happen due to political maturity exhibited by the Congress under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi and the Communist parties of India. Given the situation in the country it can be expected that both the Congress and Communist parties show their visionary politics for betterment of the nation and its people.

There is a difference between BJP's strategy of social engineering and the social engineering strategy of the Congress. BJP is genuinely involved in political upliftment of Bahujans in terms of ensuring political representation to them. It has successfully accommodated Bahujan leaders by providing them important political positions. But this political empowerment is guided by age old hierarchical social mentality. One cannot expect the leaders to be completely empowered given the lack of respect for social dignity in the BJP's project of political empowerment of the Bahujans. The Bahujan leaders who have been given important political positions are not acting independently as per the socio-political philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar but rather working as agents of the sectarian ideology. The Congress emerges unique earlier under Indira Gandhi and later under Sonia Gandhi in the sense that their effort of empowering Bahujan leaders caused greater benefit for the Bahujan society in terms of their independent socio-political assertions. Leaders like Devaraj Urs, and much later, Mallikarjun Kharge have made the community to assert their right for political space with social dignity and larger freedom. This assertion was to a greater extent respected by Indira Gandhi and later Sonia Gandhi. At present, it seems that some of the Bahujan parties like Bahujan Samaj Party have given up their fight against majoritarian politics and their assertion of independent socio-political identity. It is time for the Congress and other parties to make India Prabhuddha Bharat (Enlightened India) as envisaged by Babasaheb Ambedkar. This is possible given the political maturity of the Gandhi family which the nation has witnessed.