

India's Tectonic Political Shift: 'Authoritative Hegemony' and the 'Congress System'

Debating 'Leadership' And Silence On Policy Regime

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Global Research, March 20, 2017

[Counter Currents](#) 18 March 2017

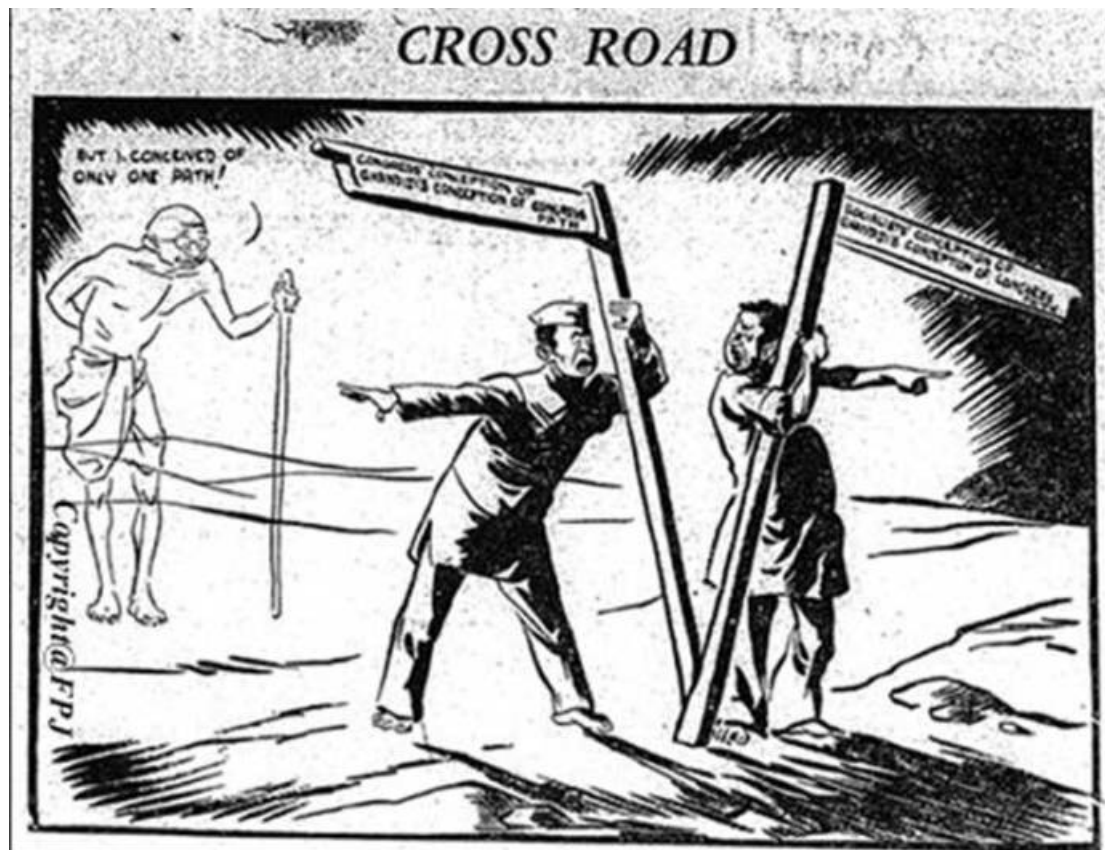
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Way back in the 1960s and 1970s, noted political scientist Rajni Kothari used to characterise the Indian political system as essentially 'Congress System' with 'one party' exercising its 'authoritative' hegemony, depicting the Congress as the "spokesman of the nation as well as its affirmed agent of criticism and change." Kothari even predicted that the Congress would likely to be the most organized political party in the country, with a nationwide following and considerable depth in the localities. The party was expected to be in a position to control widespread local power and patronage even where it was no longer in power at the state level.

Kothari's predictions had gone wrong with Indira Gandhi taking the party to a different style of functioning since the Emergency days and it eventually resulted in a long period of crisis and decay. Scholars even considered the transition of Indian democracy since 1975 as the beginning of the end of 'Congress System.' The most devastating performance of the Congress party, both at the national and state level, came since the 2014 General Elections (when it secured just 44 seats in Lok Sabha), followed by setbacks in elections in different states, including in the largest states in India such as UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh etc.

It was in this context that the 'debates' emerged within the party that the time had come for a leadership change. Even before the recently held assembly elections, the Congress leader Sheila Dikshit had said that Rahul Gandhi was "still not mature, his age does not allow him to be mature." Sensing the danger of the appropriation of this statement by the BJP, Dikshit revised her position saying that "Rahul has the sensitivity and concern of a mature leader. His words are those of a young, courageous and restless man." Criticism against the leadership continued from different quarters, and former Union Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar demanded a change in leadership of the party. Denigration of the Congress leadership stepped up after the party faced serious setbacks in the UP and Uttarakhand elections, and could not form the government in Goa and Manipur despite its moderate performance as the single-largest party.



Meanwhile there was a petition campaign underway suggesting the name of Shashi Tharoor as the 'ideal-typical' PM candidate for the Congress in the 2019 elections. It says: "Shashi Tharoor is a man well qualified with deep knowledge of international and national issues, who can connect with the people of India and with world leaders." There is a strong feeling gaining ground across a wide section that the current crisis of the Congress is basically the crisis of the leadership, and thereby putting the entire blame on Rahul Gandhi and his coterie. This is surely a part of the big story. The decline of the Congress started much earlier with Mrs Gandhi, and subsequently Rajiv Gandhi, moving ahead with the liberalisation drive under the pressure of the international capital. Manmohan Singh only accelerated the pace of this process. The social base of the Congress began to experience serious structural changes in the post-emergency period, particularly after 1981. Though the Congress could still win the elections, the social landscape witnessed expanding frustration of its traditional vote bank, including the emerging urban middle class. In states like UP and other densely populated regions, the deep frustration found expression in their voting pattern. Rising unemployment in traditional sectors, besides shrinking opportunities in the emerging industrial fields, brought in greater uncertainties and unsure pathways. The Far Right forces (Parivarism) since 1980s began to capitalise this deeper social crisis by effectively appropriating 'cultural crisis' set in by the Ram Mandir issue, on the one hand, and the common civil code (post-Shah Bano case) controversy, on the other. Occasionally, the Sangh Parivar also used 'swadeshi' question to masquerade its commitment to much faster capitalist development. The social crisis caused by LPG model only disrupted social solidarity of secularisation process which paved the way for Sangh making inroads into the social base which Congress traditionally held for long.

As years went on, the BJP also came out in open to accelerate the pace of 'reforms', the consequences of which are much deeper. Yet, the Congress couldn't come forward with any alternative as the BJP has already co-opted its policy regime, using 'culture' as a social

shield of countering and containing emerging social unrest. The success of Modi is his regime of 'event' managing the social constituency by negotiating with traditional caste groups even as it has been maintaining a panopticon state in terms of monitoring its potential 'enemies' and 'friends.'

A much greater advantage of Modi regime is the global atmospheric pressure which fits in with a Far Right 'historical bloc' (as Gramsci referred to in the context of West European capitalist scenario). The post-global financial crisis and post-Euro zone crisis reminded both the US and UK that they needed to revisit their neoliberal globalist regimes, the consequences of which are unpredictable at least for some time. Modi too will have to face the long term consequences of this structural shift in global economy. If he is proceeding with 'Pathanjalisation' of Indian economy with false pretensions of indigenisation (make-in-India), he may succeed for some time. But the social crisis will be deepening in diverse forms, including communalisation and disruption in social solidarity. The Congress unfortunately has no alternative social agenda. It has the single agenda of meeting the 'threat' from BJP while the threat from social dislocations caused by the 'austerity' regime is much deeper and all-pervading. A change of leadership will have the effect of cosmetic exercise which can temporarily infuse confidence but not necessarily a sustainable solution to the long term crisis the Congress has been undergoing.

There are many in the calibre of Tharoor in the Congress party. But the question is if the party should proceed with an iconocentric approach to politics. Charisma may be a good rallying point for some time. But as the system gets down to brass tacks, things may go beyond the image of one person or a rainbow coalition of a few. Politics is after all the art of social management where peoples' aspirations do matter. That's why many would emphasize the question of social policy alternatives. No country survived in the post-liberalization period without experiencing social chaos. The first country in South Asia, which had to undergo liberalization, was Sri Lanka, way back in the 1970s.

The next two decades saw the country being torn by ethnic conflicts. Yugoslavia witnessed the same process of liberalization in the 1980s in Europe, but the end result was its balkanisation, in less than a decade, with ethnic conflicts assuming genocidal proportions. This has happened in almost all countries in the Global South and, in India, it has taken a communal turn which has been appropriated by the Sangh Parivar across the country. In places like Kashmir and in other countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, it was Islamism which took the role of Far Right extremism in public spheres. Yet, the Congress is yet to look at the problems of the party system from the point of view of social policy framework and the issues that emerged from the local to international. Leadership question is only one aspect of multi-faceted problems that the Congress has been facing for long.

Tharoor himself came out in open denying the possibility of his emergence for the 2019 elections. He said: The party has a settled leadership, which is not up for debate. When changes occur they do so through an established procedure." If the obsession is still about the leader, not the policy regime, this is definitely going to take things to a different level. Paradoxically, Tharoor himself had written about the leadership question earlier:

"Five decades ago, as India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, began visibly ailing, the nation and the world were consumed by the question: 'After Nehru, who?' The inexpressible fear lay in the subtext to the question: 'After Nehru, what?'

No doubt, the decline of the Congress is going to affect social texture of the democratic system in the country with the Sangh Parivar taking the lead in declaring India 'Congress-free.' Obviously, the UP victory will make a difference in BJP-led NDA's capacity to bring in the long pending legislations in areas such as land acquisition, labour regulations, reforms in banking sector, taxation regime etc with the Rajya Sabha offering a comfortable platform for negotiations. Given the Congress party's pro-liberalisation and pro-reform approach, one cannot expect any major shifts in its attitude on the above issues. The crisis of the Congress is thus more ideological and social, rather than a mere question of leadership. If the Congress should still re-emerge as "spokesman of the nation" besides "its affirmed agent of criticism and change," it should, by and large, revisit its very approach to the existing policy regime.

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