THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

July 24, 2024

The Congress in a New Ideological Avatar

Opportunities and Challenges

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The Congress's new focus on social justice and inequality has brought it electoral dividends, reversing a steady decline in its fortunes. Further growth will not be easy; it depends on how well it can deal with the contradictions that will now emerge as it seeks to rebuild its electoral base.

Has the Indian National Congress in 2024 become "anti-Congress" in its ideological positioning? If so, what has prompted this turnaround?

There is an emerging consensus that after a long time the Congress party campaigned in the 2024 elections with a clear ideological narrative linked to social justice and the need to address economic inequality. Many have indicated that this ideological articulation was critical for the party being able to show an improved performance in the 2024 elections. The Congress almost doubled its seat tally and marginally improved its overall vote share, even as it contested close to 100 fewer seats than in 2019. The party has registered a significant increase in its vote share in contested seats.

This has naturally surprised political commentators and Congress sympathisers alike. The Congress party had been facing multiple challenges for a long time, and for a host of reasons few had expected this kind of turnaround in its fortunes. The party's social base was becoming narrower with every election cycle, and its electoral strength had fallen precipitously. After the two crushing defeats in 2014 and 2019, a leadership crisis was brewing at the top. An organisational atrophy marked this period, with many top leaders of the party moving out.

The most important reason cited by commentators for the poor state of the party was that at the heart of the crisis was the Congress party's ideological ambiguity. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the Congress to convince its supporters of what it stood for and its vision for India.

How should we understand the Congress party's new ideological positioning?

In this article, we explore the ideological positions of the Congress party in the three areas of caste and social justice, religion and secularism, and centre-state relations and federalism, and how the party's position has changed on these issues since Independence. These issues are not an exhaustive list of the ideological questions that are shaping the contours of Indian politics today. We hope to use them as a lens to understand the reasons for the current turnaround of the Congress and whether this changing ideological stance is more of an election-time posturing or if the party is invested in its new image. Are we likely to see a clearer intellectual positioning on these issues, and does the Congress have the willingness and ability to mobilise on them? And, finally, will the new ideological positioning help or hurt the Congress party in the near future?

Caste and social justice

The Congress has had a complicated, and rather ambiguous relationship with questions of caste and social justice. Until the Emergency, the Congress enjoyed support amongst the upper castes (largely Brahmins), Dalits, and Muslims. Its support amongst the 'middle' castes remained tenuous at best. While the Congress advocated a society in which the importance of caste would slowly wane, it very carefully managed caste aspirations in various ways, including in the selection of candidates. The party deftly created caste coalitions at the state level, which helped it to dominate the political landscape. On the ground, these social coalitions were arranged in a typical patron-client system in which traditionally landholding groups, mostly upper castes, were Congress party mobilisers.

In the Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi years, many in the Congress believed that economic criteria rather than caste should be the basis of reservations, but they were cautious when dealing with the reservation question. The Kalelkar Commission's recommendation for socially and economically backward castes were kept under the carpet for more than two decades. The Mandal Commission's recommendations were brushed aside by Indira Gandhi when she returned to power in 1980, and later by Rajiv Gandhi as well.

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The subsequent backward caste assertion and the rise of Dalit politics meant that the Congress was compelled to change its stance on social justice in the 1990s, especially when the upper castes across north India started favouring the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Muslims supported state-level political formations. The Congress in 2006, as part of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, extended reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in central government education institutions and started making overtures to win Dalit votes. However, until recently, both these groups kept their distance from the party. In the past two years, the Congress has been aggressively campaigning for a nation-wide caste census, demanding a more proportionate inclusion of lower castes in various power structures.

Will this change in the party's ideological stance on the social justice question help it gain support amongst the lower castes, especially in the Hindi heartland? Is the party willing to invest in building leadership amongst these communities or was this more of an election-time rhetoric? And how would parties such as Samajwadi Party (SP) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) react to the rise of the Congress on the back of their ideological platforms? The answers to these questions will depend on the seriousness the Congress shows in intellectually articulating and mobilising support for its new position on the question of social justice.

Religion and secularism

The Congress as an umbrella coalition in the years around Independence had within its fold both religious conservatives as well as staunch secularists. Thus, while advocating the principles of secularism, there was always an inherent tension within the party on how to accommodate India's diverse religious sensibilities. This was most visible when Prime Minister Nehru raised strong objections to President Rajendra Prasad 'inaugurating' the new Somnath temple in 1951. This was also obvious in the subsequent resignation of Purushottam Das Tandon as Congress party president, and also during the passage of the Hindu Code Bill.

Much later, in the years before and after the Emergency, Indira Gandhi's stance on secularism changed. While during the Emergency, the words 'secular' and 'socialist' were added to the preamble of the Constitution, when Indira Gandhi came back to power in 1980 after defeating Janata Party, she decided to portray herself as a devout Hindu, wearing Hindu symbols and attending the Kumbh Mela. She had by then lost Dalit support after Jagjivan Ram left the party. Moreover, the infamous sterilisation programme during the Emergency, pushed by Sanjay Gandhi, had distanced Muslims from the party. The armed insurgencies in various parts of India, especially in Punjab, may have compelled Indira Gandhi to mobilise support amongst Hindus by using overt religious symbols. A minor piece of anecdotal evidence indicating this change is that when Indira Gandhi first took oath as prime minister in 1966, she took her oath swearing in the name of the Constitution. In 1980 she took her oath in the name of God.

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Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister after 1984 faced several challenges on the religious front. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had in the mid-1980s started ground-level mobilisation in support of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The losses suffered by the Congress in Lok Sabha by-elections compelled certain sections within the party to win back Muslim support by making overtures to religious elites by reversing the 1985 Shah Bano judgement. The Hindu right criticised this as appeasement of Muslims. As the opposition was gaining ground over corruption charges against the government, Rajiv Gandhi then decided to appeal to the Hindu right by opening the locks of the disputed site at Ayodhya and he began his 1989 election campaign from there. It became amply clear by the 1996 Lok Sabha elections that the Congress, under PV Narasimha Rao, had substantially lost its appeal amongst both secularists as well as religious conservatives amongst Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs.

The return of the Congress to the union government in 2004 as part of the UPA with Manmohan Singh as prime minister, witnessed the constitution of the Sachar Committee, whose report in 2006 pointed out, amongst many things, the political and economic backwardness amongst the Muslim community. The selective quoting from Manmohan Singh's statement at a National Development Council meeting regarding minorities of the country having 'the first right to resources' became fodder for communal rhetoric thereafter. In the years that followed, the tag of the Congress party leader pursuing appeasement of Muslims for votes under the garb of secularism seems to have stuck. This was most evident in an internal report by Congress leader A.K. Antony that pointed out that the 'pro-minority' and 'anti-Hindu' image of the party was amongst the main reasons for the party's worst-ever tally of 44 seats in 2014.

> The Congress party's support amongst Hindu voters, especially the upper castes, has declined substantially since the 1990s. The party will have to articulate a distinct ideological position that differentiates itself from the BJP's Hindutva while still resonating with Hindu sentiments.

Post 2014, Rahul Gandhi made a push to portray himself as a devout Hindu. Such branding attempts could convince only a few. Thereafter, the Congress has made serious efforts to project itself as the protector of secular principles. It has continued to attack BJP on rising majoritarianism, increase in violence against Muslims, and discrimination on religious lines. The party's decision to not attend the inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya in January 2024 and the tag-line of Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatras - *Nafrat ke bazaar main mohabbat ki dukaan* ("Love/fraternity in the bazaar of hatred")- in some ways was largely aimed to placate voters who valued secular principles. It also hoped for consolidation of Muslim voters behind the INDIA-bloc parties.

Now that the Congress has the objective of consolidating Muslim voters behind the INDIA-bloc parties, how far is the party likely to go on the political representation of Muslims? The INDIA-bloc parties for the past few years have significantly reduced the number of Muslim candidates as their nominees, largely fearing a majoritarian backlash. They have also been accused by a section of civil society and Muslim leadership of not seriously raising the issues the community is facing, especially the incidents of targeted violence.

The Congress's task of articulating itself on religion and secularism must also address the cultural question. Merely opposing the Hindutva politics of BJP would not suffice. In some parts of the country there may be some fatigue with the BJP's aggressive posturing on this issue but it remains an attractive platform in many other areas. Congress' support amongst Hindu voters, especially the upper castes has declined substantially since the 1990s. The party will have to articulate a distinct ideological position that differentiates itself from BJP's Hindutva while still resonating with Hindu sentiments, a delicate balance that would not be easy.

Centre-state relations and federalism

The Congress has accused the BJP government in office of not respecting federalism and acting in a partisan manner in dealing with the states. This includes the appointment of governors who are 'hostile' to opposition party chief ministers, or the centre not devolving adequate funds to opposition-ruled states.

The Congress itself has been accused of similar charges when it has held office. During the 1970s and 1980s, opposition parties including state-level formations such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Shirnomani Akali Dal (SAD) vehemently argued for an active federal structure against increasing centralisation. Similarly, leaders such as Ramakrishna Hegde from Karnataka and N.T. Rama Rao from Andhra Pradesh made similar demands, especially for greater devolution of financial powers.

Furthermore, the Congress gave up on its reluctance in 1956 to create the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) only after widespread public protests. This reluctance was again visible during the creation of three new states of Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand in 2000 during the National Democratic Alliance government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and later in the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana during the tenure of the UPA II government.

Similarly, there is enough evidence available to implicate the Congress for its weak record on adherence to federal principles. The usage of Article 356 of the Constitution to dismiss state governments (sometimes on flimsy grounds) and changing chief ministers at whim continued during the tenures of both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi as prime ministers. Further, politically, with the Congress' internal workings becoming more centralised, the high command culture affected the party's ability to manage its state leadership or nurture new talent.

The Congress' current stance on federalism is not merely limited to the political side, but also addresses the fiscal. Opposition-ruled states have raised serious questions on the emerging federal relations, citing unfair tax sharing, a forced dependence on central schemes, and GST-related woes. The Congress and allies have argued that central directives and schemes are being used to undermine state-level initiatives in areas such as education and food distribution. The new fiscal regime has severely limited the states' ability to pursue their development agendas.

Does the Congress' current stance on federalism indicate a new ideological position or is it more of a rhetorical device as the party is in opposition, much like the BJP which advocated a cooperative federal model pre-2014?

The 'anti-Congress' position

What prompted Congress to take an 'anti-Congress' position?

The Congress's ideological position cannot be cast in a single mould. As a party holding the legacy of India's freedom movement, it had leaders of varied hues of ideology. The umbrella coalition structure of the party enabled it to adopt a centrist position while accommodating all shades of opinion. Rajni Kothari in his germinal paper on the 'Congress System' suggested that the party was the dominant hegemon in Indian national politics: it was the party of consensus while the other political parties acted as parties of pressure.

The Congress also had the advantage (or disadvantage) of managing different social coalitions in different states. The fragmented oppositional politics helped the party to remain dominant nationally without seriously taking ideological positions on key questions. This makes the analytical task of understanding the party's centrist position much harder: was it an outcome of stated design or merely accidental, due to the confluence of several factors?

The party's umbrella coalition had space for all social groups and multiple viewpoints on various issues. The Congress's position as a centrist party stood in sharp contrast to the left-leaning stances of the communist and socialist parties, and the right-leaning platforms of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) and Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (ABHM), amongst others. The party's electoral dominance during the first two decades after Independence created enabling conditions to absorb all kinds of groups within its ambit.

> In some ways, the emerging political competition has forced the Congress to take more clear positions on certain ideological questions that the party had been avoiding for a long time.

However, the party's position on several issues in the years after the Emergency became more ambivalent. From the late 1980s onwards, Congress began to get marginalised in state after state, and the visible effect of this was the rise of another national party, BJP, in the 1990s.

The Congress then remained adrift during the coalition era between 1989 and 2014. The rise of the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014, and the simultaneous decline in the electoral strength of the parties on the centre-left, including that of the Congress, created the conditions for the party to now shed its centrist position and move towards a more left-leaning position on multiple issues. In some ways, the emerging political competition has forced the Congress to take clear positions on certain ideological questions that the party had been avoiding for a long time. It also seems that Rahul Gandhi has decided to play the ideological counterweight to Prime Minister Modi.

While the 2024 Lok Sabha election results have prompted many to assert that the resurgence of the Congress has begun, very few had expected the party to perform this well as late as March 2024. The significant change in the Congress's positioning raises several questions, including what prompted the shift and the dividends it may bring. In the current party system, in which the BJP seems to be driving the national political agenda thus far, Congress party now finds itself in a 'non-Congress' position. In short, the stances and issues that were advocated long ago by the opposition parties such as the socialists, the two communist parties, and the DMK, amongst others, are being embraced by the present-day Congress.

Under what conditions do political parties undergo an ideological makeover? Political parties are essentially conservative organisations that resist change. The literature suggests political parties show changing (or adapting) policy (or ideological) positions as a result of internal or external stimulus, and that these changes happen mostly in gradual shifts. The internal factors include a leadership change or the emergence of a dominant faction within the party's decision-making authority. Parties also evaluate the need for a change in their positions based on the success of previous shifts. They may also bring about changes in their position either to distance themselves from rival parties, or bring their position closer to an ally party. The external stimuli for change in a party's ideological position are driven by an evaluation of its own 'unexpected' electoral performance, a changing social base, or dramatic shifts in public opinion on a set of policy questions.

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The turnaround in the Congress' ideological articulation is in part prompted by a serious erosion in its electoral strength and the rise of the BJP under Modi, with the latter now firmly occupying the centre-right ideological space of Indian politics. The rapid changes in the demographic profile of voters since the 1990s (more media exposure, higher educational attainment, and greater economic resources), along with the increasing penetration of the BJP had slowly shifted the ideological median of the Indian voters towards the

centre-right.

These shifts in the past decade have also been marked by the decline in electoral strength of the communist parties, the Janata Dal fragments in north India (mainly the SP, the RJD, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). This created the space for the Congress to take on the positions that were once advocated by its rivals, some of whom have become Congress allies.

> The critical question […] is whether the recent improvement in the party's electoral fortunes indicates the possibility of Congress making incremental gains over the next few election cycles. The answer in part depends on the acceptability of the Congress's current ideological position amongst a broader section of the Indian electorate.

Rahul Gandhi is rightly credited as the architect of the new ideological line. For example, Yamini Aiyar has argued about Rahul Gandhi being the real story in this election, and that too in sharp contrast to his presence in 2014 and 2019. "His emergence as a leader with credibility and legitimacy, a process that began with the Bharat Jodo Yatra in September 2022, finally consolidated through this campaign. He presented a clear and distinct political position, one that positioned him as a humane, people's leader, centring issues of the Constitution, democracy and social justice." Similarly, Yogendra Yadav in a recent interview opined that Rahul Gandhi embodies "a blend of Nehruvian idealism, Ambedkar's commitment to social justice, and socialist principles advocating for economic equality."

Rahul Gandhi has often equated the electoral contest against BJP (and RSS) as an ideological battle, and now that he has been formally appointed as the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Lok Sabha, the fault lines are likely to get sharper, both within the House as well as outside, on the streets.

Will this new ideological avatar help or hurt?

Will the Congress benefit by advocating this new ideological line, especially as a lot of it is antithetical to the party's position in the past? While the BJP-led NDA alliance has managed to form the government, some commentators have drawn a comparison of the 2024 election results with the 1977 elections when the newly formed Janata Party usurped the Indira Gandhi government at the centre. Other commentators have suggested, on a more sober note, that the results are not an indication of widespread support for Congress' new political avatar.

The critical question here is whether the recent improvement in the party's electoral fortunes indicates the possibility of the Congress making incremental gains over the next few election cycles. The answer in part depends on the acceptability of the Congress's current ideological position amongst a broader section of the Indian electorate.

For this, the party has to move from abstract posturing on the question of "*nyay*" to a more concrete platform and set of policy measures, especially on the economic front. There are no easy answers to the unemployment crisis in the Indian economy, and some form of welfare populism seems to have become a benchmark for all political parties.

The Congress continues to remain ambivalent about its imagination of state-capital relations, and how it wishes to engage with the emerging political economy. Its current posturing of attacking big businesses on the charges that the BJP has been promoting crony capitalism must also include an articulation of how the party wishes to manage relations with capital in states where it is in power, and how it would engage with capital when the party assumes power at the national level. As of now, the party's dilemma is understandable, given its history of heralding the licence-permit raj as well as being the mover of economic reforms.

The Congress has a long battle ahead. Whether the results of 2024 indicate a moment of revival or it is merely a moment of relief for the party, remains unknown. What is important is that the party, despite going through its worst electoral phase in its history, continues to remain a node of Indian politics: it has garnered one in every five votes polled nationally in the last three election cycles. In approximately half of the Lok Sabha seats Congress is in direct contention with the BJP and it has significantly improved its strike rate against BJP in the 2024 elections.

Whether the Indian National Congress can further improve its position in national politics must remain an open question for now. It depends both on the party's ability as well as a willingness to engage with the challenges its new ideological posturing will present.

The authors would like to thank Rahul Sarwate for germinating this idea, and Suhas Palshikar and Pradeep Chhibber for their comments.

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