

75 YEARS OF THE CONGRESS FAMILY: IS A GET TOGETHER POSSIBLE?

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Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav : India at

75

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Publ

Delhi, 2022, pp 62-75

75 years is a considerable period of time for history — for it allows us *longue durée* or a long view of the life of a people. It is what distinguishes history from politics which is obsessed with the present and the relentless current quest for power. Where the latter is concerned, eight long years have only strengthened, with repeated evidence, that Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party control everything with practically no challenge whatsoever. Along with this is the other striking phenomena of the total marginalisation of the nation's prime opposition party, the Indian National Congress, that had ruled India for several decades after Independence as the inheritor of the country's freedom struggle. The Congress has splintered time and again and today it rules just two of India's 31 states, one reasonably important and the other less so, regional parties that broke away from it at some point rule three — all very important states. The 'parent party' has 53 members in the Lok Sabha and its 'children' put together have 52. In other words, the break-away par-

ties equal the performance of the Grand Old Party. Another interesting fact is that two of the leaders of these offspring parties, Sharad Pawar and Mamata Banerjee, have certainly proven that they can give Modi a run for his money, often far better than what the current leadership of the Congress is capable of doing.

The crisis in the Congress at the end of 75 years of the Republic may be summed in two phrases — a leadership that just does not have the killer instinct to lead the fight-back, almost oblivious of its inglorious performance, and the other is its serious inadequacy to make space for (or peace with) those who appear more determined and capable of leading the charge. Naturally, therefore, many who belong to the Congress tradition yearn for a some sort of a dream team that could pull a presently moribund Congress, that still has the largest pan-Indian support base. They feel that, if the heavens were more magnanimous, maybe the fearsome strategic skills of a tactician like Pawar could combine with the indomitable belligerent prowess of a Mamata and assist the non-BJP forces personified by the Congress and its UPA (United Progressive Alliance) allies recapture Raisina Hill. Since wishful thinking is expansive, dreamers would also like the Congress to win back the third major Congress offspring, the YSR (Yuvajana Sramika Rythu) Congress Party that it deliberately smoked out not too long ago — and is seething with rage against the parent, ever since then. This happy family reunion of the Congress *gharana* appears to be too wish-wish a pro-

posal, as realpolitik is far different. To understand where we are today, we need to understand what happened in the past.

So, let us start the journey of 75 years, straight from the zero hour of year one. We refer to August 1947 and amidst the euphoria of emerging free from British Imperial rule, were voices of discordance. The bitterness between the Congress and its two early challengers at that time comes out quite starkly. Let us see the Communist Party first. It had supported the freedom struggle during very brief patches, and then delinked itself from it, in favour of collaboration with the British rulers, as dictated by its puppeteer, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. To justify this marionette-like behaviour to the large pool of intellect and talent, it mouthed a lot of ideology, selflessness and World Revolution. The party did not participate in the Independence Day celebrations in 1947, in protest of the division of the country. Its Ranadive Line that triggered armed struggle in Telangana, West Bengal (Kakdwip), Tripura and Travancore-Cochin between October 1948 and March 1950 were dealt with, most sternly by Patel and the Chief Ministers who banned the party. By 1949 2,500 party members were imprisoned across the country.

The other opposition to the Congress stemmed from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu Mahasabha that had stayed away from the national struggle and had let down thousands who braved the brutality of the British imperialism. Instead, the Hindu right flaunted its undis-

guised communal viewpoint as the only true form of 'nationalism' acceptable to it. As the second chief of the RSS, MS Golwalkar, explained in his essay *Towards a Masculine Nationhood*, the RSS's aloofness was 'manly' and also that he did not consider agitating against the British imperial power an act of nationalism. The Hindu Mahasabha not only savoured the goods of office after Indians were allowed to form provincial governments from 1937 (with very limited powers) by joining hands with the Muslim League government in Sind and not opposing the League's Resolution demanding Pakistan.

Its number two leader, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, joined the Fazlul Haque government and actually egged the British to crack down on patriots. In a letter to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, John Herbert, on the 26 July, 1942, just before the historic Quit India movement led by Gandhiji, Shyama Prasad wrote, "As a minister of your government, I would like to express my total support to you." He insisted that "if anyone tries to incite people and disturb internal peace and security, government should act strongly". It is this same leader who would switch to the RSS and help it set up its political wing, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and this episode may help us understand why the Hindu Right was sulking when Independence actually came, in 1947. The Sangh began a toxic campaign as soon as it appeared that the Congress had managed to free India, and started blaming the choice of tricolour flag. Its mouthpiece called *Organiser* openly attacked this flag in its issues of 17th and 22nd July and RSS chief Golwalkar

declared that Hindus would never accept the tri-colour as “three was an inauspicious number” to Hindus. He seems to have forgotten that since ancient times, Hindus had worshipped the trinity of Brahma-Vishnu-Maheshwar, the concept *Triguna* in the Bhagawad Gita, the *Trishul* and so on.

While Nehru could put up with this frustrating opposition, the Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, had lesser tolerance, even though, unlike Nehru, he was a devout Hindu himself. Immediately after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on 30th January 1948, he banned the RSS and imprisoned its leaders. He ignored the several mercy petitions submitted by Golwalkar and refused to release any of the RSS leaders until the middle of 1949, when the Sangh finally capitulated and submitted a solemn undertaking in writing. Therein, the RSS declared their allegiance to the national flag and promised to be on best behaviour. This is the genetic background of the present regime under Modi.

What we discuss far less is that the Congress itself was permeated by sympathisers and activists of the Far Right, the Far Left and by ultra-conservative Hindus. The Congress had a Hindu-nationalist streak running along its right side anyway, ever since Gokhale and Tilak mixed nationalism with Hinduism and Madan Mohan Malaviya never hid his far right views. Conservatives in the Congress, like C Rajagopalachari and Rajendra Prasad, drew the line that an atheist, westernised left liberal like Nehru

could not cross. On the other hand, the Congress also accommodated Communist supporters like VK Krishna Menon and later, Mohan Kumaramangalam, who wielded considerable power under Nehru and Indira, when left intellectuals dominated Indian academia. Such contradictions within the Congress were, in fact, its source of strength as the mammoth pan-Indian organisation emulated the Hindu ethos of management of contradictions.

The Socialists within the Congress, however, proved to be another extra-hot cup of tea. Started in the mid-1930s, as the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), a left caucus within the Indian National Congress, they rejected Gandhian mysticism and the Russia-led Communist Party of India. Soon after Independence, Indian socialists left the parent Congress party to form distinct political fighting formations, like the Praja Socialist Party. This marks the beginning of break-away units that would play a very important role in Indian politics. It is our central concern in this paper and as we shall soon see while many returned to the Congress and were rewarded, several others would never return. Among the latter were the Socialists, who not only severed all connections but were on the forefront of anti-Congress politics.

The first general election was held in February 1952 and was an epoch making step as literacy rates were very low — just 27.16% among males and 8.86% for females. There were stupendous problems that were overcome when 8.86 crore vot-

ers stamped their ballots — well over 51 percent of the total. Though 53-political parties participated and the Congress won 361 seats, securing 45% of votes; the CPI contested 49 seats and won 16 seats, coming out as the second biggest party though it secured only 3.29% votes. Though the Hindu Right was inflaming communal passions among the Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan and the RSS had spawned its own political party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh just six months earlier, it could win only 3 Lok Sabha seats. The Hindu Mahasabha won 4 seats and the Ram Rajya Parishad one.

Even before the next election, Nehru announced his “socialistic pattern of society” and had it passed by the Congress at its Avadi session in 1955. Anti-socialist conservative right-wing Congressmen led by C. Rajagopalachari, T Prakasam, Minoo Masani, N.G. Ranga and K.M. Munshi openly opposed it and left the party to found the Swatantra Party in 1959, just after the 1957 general elections when the Nehru wave and Socialism were at their peak. This was the second major break-away from the Congress and in the 1962 general election, the first after its formation, Swatantra secured 7.89 percent of the total votes and captured 18 seats in the third Lok Sabha (1962–67). In four states, Bihar, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Orissa, it emerged as the main opposition to the ruling Congress and by the next general election in 1967, Swatantra had become a powerful force in several parts of India. The party became the single-largest opposition party in the fourth Lok Sabha (1967–71) with 44 seats, having

won 8.7 percent of the votes. We shall visit this period later when Indira went through considerable opposition within her party. In 1971, Swatantra joined a "Grand Alliance" of parties from across the political spectrum formed to defeat Indira Gandhi. The Swatantra party's vote share plunged, however, to just one thirds and it could get only eight seats. Indira Gandhi had outwitted the right more effectively than her father and within a couple of years, Swatantra declined rapidly (Rajagopalachari died in 1972) and many of its members joining the Charan Singh-led Bharatiya Lok Dal.

We have come a little too forward, so let us go back to the mid 1960s, when Lohia and his Socialists made anti Congress their primary ideology. The 1967 elections hurt the Congress, which lost 78 seats in the Lok Sabha (its break-away Swatantra Party won 44) and the Congress lost its dominant position in several States. For the first time, India witnessed a slew of non-Congress governments in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Bihar, Punjab, Odisha, Kerala, and Rajasthan. Even in Uttar Pradesh, where it had managed a majority, it lost its hold within a month, as Charan Singh left the party with several MLAs to form his new Bharatiya Kranti Dal to head a non-Congress coalition. The era of regional parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was in and State Congress units had started breaking up. In 1964, KM George set up the Kerala Congress and in 1966, veteran Congressman, Ajoy Mukherjee revolted against the old guard in West Bengal to set up the Bangla Congress. This was also the age of

patch-work coalitions like the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD) front in Uttar Pradesh or the United Front in West Bengal.

Indira realised that unless the Congress tackled the widespread frustration that had expressed itself at the hustings, the party's fate was sealed. People were angry over unemployment, high prices, a sluggish economy and the food crisis, but she was stifled by the old guard in the Congress who ran the party. Her rival, Morarji Desai, was made Deputy Prime Minister to checkmate her and by 1969, she retaliated. She sabotaged the old guard's choice for the President's election and made sure that her candidate, V V Giri, won through what was called the "conscience votes" strategy. Then, without consulting the Deputy PM and Finance Minister, Morarji Desai, she decided to nationalise banks and the disgusted Congress President expelled her from the party forthwith. Indira Gandhi, floated her own faction, Congress (R) or Requisition and managed to retain most of the Congress MPs on her side. Only 65 MPs sided with the parent party, that was branded as the Congress (Organisation). Though Indira lost her majority in the parliament she remained in power with the support of regional parties like the DMK.

By 1971, Indira had marginalised the Congress (O) and her Congress faction had won the parliament elections on its own strength, defeating the 'Grand Alliance' formed against her by the Congress (O), Swatantra Party, Samyukta Socialist Party and the

Bharatiya Jana Sangh. By the end of the year, she emerged as India's historic leader in her own right, as the victor of the Bangladesh War. Politics is, however, unpredictable and even after reaching this pinnacle, she faced massive popular demonstrations in Gujarat and Bihar just three years later. By 1975, popular upsurge had started peaking and a court decision unseated her from her constituency. She took the unprecedented and unpopular decision of clamping a State of Emergency—arresting every opposition leader of any consequence. This brought them closer, in spite of sharp ideological differences and as soon as the State of Emergency was lifted and new elections announced in early 1977, they came together. Parties such as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Congress (O), Bharatiya Lok Dal and other elements from different parties coalesced to constitute a new party — the Janata party. What is interesting is that several groups that had splintered from the old mother Congress, like the Utkal Congress, Lok Dal, Congress for Democracy and even remnants of the Congress (O), fragments of Congress (R) and elements from the wound-up Swatantra Party party got together under one roof — after a long time — to oppose the mainstream Congress of the day.

This new unified party swept the 1977 polls and Indira Gandhi lost, which unseated the Congress from Delhi after 30 long years, even though the most prominent leaders of the Janata Party were from the Congress tradition. The former members of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh continued, however, to be more loyal to the RSS and their 'dual membership'

and communal agenda split the Janata Party, as former Congress and Socialist elements could no longer co-habit with the Hindu Right. Charan Singh walked out of the Janata government in June 1979, causing it to fall, but could not prove his majority. President Sanjeeva Reddy requested him to continue as the interim PM until the 1980 elections.

Around the same time, a revolt broke out within Indira Gandhi's Congress, against her son, Sanjay Gandhi, and by July 1979, Devraj Urs, the Chief Minister of Karnataka, led out a large break-away faction from the Deccan. It was soon called the Indian National Congress (Urs) which consisted of Yashwantrao Chavan, Dev Kant Baruah, K Brahmananda Reddy, A.K. Antony, Sharad Pawar, Sarat Chandra Sinha, Priya Ranjan Das Munshi and K. P. Unnikrishnan. Subsequently Urs joined the Janata Party; Chavan, Brahmananda Reddy, and C Subramaniam joined Congress (Indira); A. K. Antony left Congress (U) to form his own Congress Kerala and later joined the main Congress. Sharad Pawar took over the party presidency in October 1981 and re-named the party as the Indian National Congress (Socialist). Once Indira regained power in early 1980, her Congress stopped breaking up and after Sanjay Gandhi died in a plane crash a few months later, the trickle back to Indira's Congress began. To understand the break and make up nature of Congress politics, let us look at Maharashtra politics of the period. Congress (I) won the State but the rebel Pawar grew more powerful as the main opposition. After Indira was assassinated and elections were held in late

1984, Pawar won his Baramati Lok Sabha seat even against the tsunami of support for Rajiv Gandhi. His lieutenants like PR Dasmunsi rejoined the mainstream Congress and were rewarded handsomely. By 1987 Pawar was welcomed back to the Congress to counter the threat of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. A year later, Rajiv Gandhi decided to place Pawar as the Chief Minister, proving that once leaders of Congress break-away units demonstrated their own independent capabilities or proved their own nuisance value, they were re-inducted and often rewarded. On the other hand, several rootless Congress leaders thrived even more as they were no threat to the leadership and the latter also knew that they had no option but to hang on.

But we need to go back a little to look at the crouching tiger, the BJP, that ultimately unseated the Congress and threatened quite seriously its regional breakaway parties. Though Rajiv Gandhi won a spectacular victory in November 1984, he had come under severe attack on the Bofors gun purchase deal controversy in two years. His handling of the Shah Bano case and his decision to open the locks of the disputed Babri Masjid catered to right wing forces, both Muslim and Hindu. His de facto number two, VP Singh resigned from the Congress to found yet another break-away party called the Janata Dal that merged various factions of the Janata Party. This is when the 'secular' Congress started running a religious serial, Ramayan, on Doordarshan for 19 months from January 1987 which helped bring Ram into every home. This inadvertently boosted the

Sangh parivar, which rode an unprecedented wave of popular religious enthusiasm. Rajiv's dithering stand thereafter could hardly tackle the BJP belligerence recharged by the TV serial and its Shila Puja programme at Ayodhya proved immensely popular.

Tensions ran high through the whole of 1989, and Rajiv was out by the end of the year, when VP Singh came to power, hopelessly dependent on BJP's support. Singh's 11 months were eventful and Advani's Ram Janambhoomi Ratha Yatra whipped up communal passions and mass hysteria, leading to police firings, communal riots and numerous deaths in August-September 1990. Singh retaliated by splitting the Hindu vote and shrewdly reserving 27 per cent of seats in education and jobs for 'Other Backward Castes' (OBCs). This implementation of the Mandal Commission Report led to the rise of powerful OBC-based parties in the two most populous states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar — but these had no or little Congress genes in them. Through the Ratha Yatra, the BJP had finally managed to shake, the monopoly of the secular-democratic narrative that had ruled for the first four decades after Independence.

During the course of the 1991 election campaign, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated and the Congress elected P.V. Narasimha Rao as the party president. Later, when the Congress won, Rao was appointed Prime Minister, in spite of Pawar's brief revolt. The destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992 was the final turn-

ing point in the Indian plural narrative. When Pawar's successor in Maharashtra, Sudhakar Rao Naik, stepped down after his disastrous handling of the Bombay riots, Prime Minister Rao sent Pawar back as chief minister, his fourth term, till 1995, when the Shiv Sena-BJP coalition unseated him. From 1996 to 1999, India witnessed considerable instability and three elections were held to the Lok Sabha and during this period Pawar opposed Sonia Gandhi's elevation as the Congress president. In 1999, Pawar and Sangma founded the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in June 1999, but despite differences, the new party allied with the Congress party to form a coalition government in Maharashtra after the 1999 state assembly elections. This was to prevent the Shiv Sena-BJP combine from returning to power. Everything, thus, appears possible in the Congress but deep rooted differences, like that between the Gandhi family and Pawar, stand in the way of any greater amity. As is known, Pawar joined the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, that governed India from 2004 to 2014. Even thereafter, he crafted an unusual alliance with the very Shiv Sena that he had fought against, for decades. In 2019, he crafted an alliance with the Shiv Sena and the Congress to keep the common enemy out of power in Maharashtra. But where this prime break-away Congress of Pawar is concerned, it is this far and no further. The future is too far away.

Let us know track the career of Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress. She joined the Congress as a student activist in the early

1970s, and rose up the ranks of the local Congress. She became the general secretary of the West Bengal Mahila Congress (Indira) from 1976 to 1980 and in 1984, Banerjee became one of India's youngest parliamentarians after defeating veteran Communist politician Somnath Chatterjee. She was made the general secretary of the Indian Youth Congress that year but she lost her seat in 1989, winning Calcutta South constituency in 1991. Mamata retained this seat in the 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009 general elections. Though she was appointed as the Union Minister of State Sports in 1991 by prime minister, Narasimha Rao, her maverick politics cost her job in 1993, and she was back on to the streets.

As the State Youth Congress, she led a protest march to Writers Building in Kolkata against the Left government on 21 July 1993. The protest went out of control and the police opened fire, killing 13 persons. A later judicial commission declared this firing as "unprovoked and unconstitutional". Her agitational politics catapulted her in the Congress and after she was unjustly arrested by the police outside the CM's room, she was on perpetual conflict with the top leaders of her party, who she accused of compromising with the decades old Left regime. She was smoked out of the state Congress in 1996, when she founded her All India Trinamool Congress (AITC). We see yet another break-away 'Congress party'.

Over the next 15 years, she and her band fought relentlessly against the Left Front government in Bengal that was not only too deeply entrenched, with the police and ad-

ministration at its beck and call, but also had an army of full-time party workers and supporters. The latter could and did pounce on her fledgling party and violence was open as well as without any retribution. Her party made alliances with the BJP in its growing years — there was no one willing to even look at her — and scored far better than the BJP **is** challenging the Left. She accepted brief periods of ministership in Delhi in the BJP-led NDA regime but walked out of them when that suited her more. About the Congress, she had nothing but contempt but she joined hands with her former party for electoral alliances or for joining its UPA coalition government at the centre, when benefits appeared more and often dropping out if that was more advantageous. In these 15 years, she managed to dislodge the Left Front government, that was unthinkable, and by the time she reached her third term as CM in 2021, she accomplished another extraordinary feat of defeating the very might of Prime Minister Modi. She has sucked the parent party dry in West Bengal to such an extent that it has zero number of seats in the state assembly, nor does the **right** Left have any either. In the process, however, her politics has triggered a phenomenon of moving all opposition forces and strength to the BJP — as never before.

Our major point of interest is her relationship with the Congress and whether there is any prospect of getting together. With Mamata Banerjee, nothing is impossible but her current relations are the lowest levels possible. When the Congress appeared completely unequal to the task of taking on the Modi regime, her contempt became more than viable. Then, when the people of Bengal showered an unprecedented 48 percent of the popular vote on her party in

2021 state elections — and wiped the Congress and Left parties out altogether — she decided to take on the Congress beyond Bengal as well. Tripura is her chief focus and then she broke up the Congress in Meghalaya, winning over quite a few over to her side. After that, she co-opted a prime Congress leader from Goa and took him to the Rajya Sabha, as her party nominee, even as she challenged the party in the Goa state elections. AITC lost the gamble but bad blood set in, especially as she welcomed more senior leaders from the Congress into her fold. She refused to accept the Congress as the natural leader of all opposition parties and, directly or indirectly, claimed this mantle as she had defeated Modi and his tsunami in the 2021 state elections as few could ever imagine. Politics is, however, absolutely unpredictable and the colour and design of the kaleidoscope changes completely with every slight tap.

Let us move to the last important breakaway group that left (or was made to leave it) by the older party. We refer to the YSR (Yuvajana Sramika Rythu) Congress Party, named cleverly by YS Jagan Mohan Reddy after his father, YSR, Y Rajsekhar Reddy — to encash on his memory and goodwill. YSR was CM of Andhra Pradesh in 2009 when he died in a helicopter accident and his son had obviously wanted a greater share of power, which was ignored by the Congress high command, that underestimated his fighting capabilities. He defied the party's central leadership and went on a 'condolence tour' all over the state in 2010, while his Sakshi media TV and paper started criticising the Delhi leaders. By the end of the year, Jagan and his mother resigned from their Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies and also quit the Congress. Congress leaders and workers

loyal to them joined the newly set up YSR Congress, forcing bye elections to be held, which the YSRC swept. This resulted in the weakening of the Congress's strength in both the assembly and the Lok Sabha, necessitating by-elections — which the new party swept. The ruling Congress in Delhi and in the state accused Jagan of corruption and he had to spend several months in judicial custody while the CBI finalised its charges. His relationship with his parent party appears to be decisively over — but then politics is politics— so nothing is for ever.

While he was in jail in 2014, the Congress split the state into two, which proved to create more opposition to it and Jagan went on a serious hunger strike against it. This was followed by a 72 hour strike. Though the YSR Congress Party was a pre-poll favourite in the 2014 elections, it lost and could win only 67 of 175 seats in the state assembly. Many legislators would soon switch over to the winner, the Telugu Desai party. Jagan was also physically attacked and injured, but thanks to his resilience and field tours, he managed to claw back. He swept the 2019 polls winning 151 of the total of 175 assembly seats and 22 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh. His is one breakaway Congress that would much rather cosy up to the BJP than cooperate with the Congress.

These being the current relations between the Congress and the three major regional that broke away from it, the chances of all four coming together in the near future appear difficult— at least in June 2022. There are also inter-personal dislikes, like those that are said to exist between Sonia and Pawar; Mamata and Rahul and Jagan with both

Sonia and Rahul. The determined decline of the Congress is a matter of deep concern and the current high command in control surely expends more energy to retain its stranglehold, come what may, rather than accommodate forceful fighters, either within the party or once a part of it. Together, against Congress's 52 seats, these three regional Congresses have a total of 49 seats in the Lok Sabha at present. This number could well stretch up to 55 or 60 if the next polls in 2024 are fought well. But all depends on whether the old Congress manages to wake up, in which scenario, 55-60 seats could, indeed, matter a lot. But, as of now, none of three leaders seriously consider the Congress legacy to be any great binding force.

There is no doubt, however, that the major contribution of the Congress to India are the twin principles of secularism and socialism. In this grave hour of peril on the 75th year of India's Independence— when these are being stamped out by jackboots — it is incumbent on the Congress to walk the extra mile. It must make genuine overtures to these three regional Congress parties, and to others who believe in the two principles, like the Samajwadi Party, Lalu Prasad's RJD and other regional formations. These have to begin right now, in a true spirit of adjustment. Unless priorities change within the Congress, and the term 'family' comes to mean a secular-socialist brotherhood rather than a tiny genetically linked one, the virtues that the national movement upheld and fought for may be frittered away for ever.

