



Reasons for Congress Party's Decline

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Abstract: Indian Politics has gone topsy turvy since 1989. Congress Party the main party of governance has experienced a decline and BJP(formerly Jana Sangh) has experienced unbelievable fortunes, of course at the expense of Congress party, especially after 2014. This paper explores reasons for Congress party's decline since 1989 and especially after 2014. This paper also offers strategy for revival of Congress party.

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I. Introduction

This paper does not get into detailed academic history of Congress party and stays clear from intellectual discussion. This paper does not have the luxury of thesis in length and breadth. This paper confines itself to reasons for Congress Party's decline.

This paper also assumes that readers know about Indian politics and does not take the trouble of education readers about Indian politics from A..B..C.

The paper assumes that the reader know about Congress Party's history approximately and also the history of BJP as also the reader is expected to know about recent performance of Congress and BJP.

This paper sticks to addressing the issue of Congress Party's decline and then gives a path for Congress party's revival.

In this there are two phases of history of Congress party's decline that is being discussed here

1. After 1989 - from when BJP started giving tough competition to Congress but Congress has also given a tough fight.

2. After 2014 - from when Congress party has been decimated so badly that it is no competition to BJP.

But instead of going chronological fashion, the paper starts with the present crisis in Congress from 2014, which is more acute disease like cancer, before attending to decline in Congress since 1989, which is a more chronic disease like diabetes or blood pressure.

Total Decimation of Congress since 2014

In 2004 general elections Congress party won 145 seats and in 2009 Congress party improved its performance substantially and won 206 seats. However in 2014 Congress party won just 44 seats and performance in 2019 elections was very bad at 52 seats.

This paper will not get into theoretical and academic and intellectual discussion on greatness of Congress party or even how marginal BJP(or Jana Sangh) was before 1989.

This section of the paper confines itself to the decline of Congress in 2014 and since 2014.

What is very surprising about the decline of Congress party in 2014 and since then is that Congress party was on ascendancy increasing its seat count from 145 in 2004 to 206 in 2009 and once again having increased its seat count from mere 114 in 1999.

Thus after 1999 Congress party was on ascendancy until 2014 and then came the huge fall. What caused this fall?

It is not change in Congress party policies or change in BJP's policy or ideology. It is not the issue of corruption or governance. Because Manmohan Singh was seen to be very clean politician with a great record of economic growth that approached nearly 10% in his first term.

So that leaves the only remaining reason and that is the leadership issue. It was Narendra Modi versus Rahul Gandhi.

Now was Narendra Modi such a great candidate that he decimated the Congress?

According to Vajpayee, the defeat in 2004 was mainly due to Gujarat Riots, for which Narendra Modi was responsible. Thus Narendra Modi was not really a strong candidate who brought down the Congress. Indeed before 2014 elections, Narendra Modi was seen as something of villain of Gujarat Riots, not just by the Congress but also by Media.

Indeed there are instance when media people had heckled Narendra Modi on the issue of Gujarat Riots, to which, since he could not give satisfactory response he had to walk away or adopt silent posture.

Thus Narendra Modi's candidature was by no means strong. Indeed while Atal Bihari Vajpayee was always considered Prime Minister material and Lal Krishna Advani was good organiser, Narendra Modi, it was presumed was just meant for Gujarat. In fact it was perhaps Gujarat Riots that made him popular in BJP, even as it made him unpopular in secular circles.

However this discussion is not about Gujarat Riots. All that is being pointed here is that Narendra Modi was a very weak candidate and it would be inappropriate to credit Congress decimation since 2014 and beyond to the candidature of Narendra Modi.

That leaves only one alternative, that Rahul Gandhi was not a strong candidate.

From all appearances Rahul Gandhi is not respected. If Jawaharlal Nehru was considered an intellectual and Indira Gandhi a strong leader and even Rajiv Gandhi a good person, there is very little positive about Rahul Gandhi except his dynasty.

Indeed Rahul Gandhi is mocked as a Pappu. His activities do not bring great respect to him. Half of the time Rahul Gandhi is outside of India vacationing. His academic qualifications are suspect. While his communication skills have improved recently, they were rather pathetic for Prime Ministerial candidate in 2014. He has inadequate intellectual ability.

And what is worse is that while Congress party still swears by him, outside of Congress party he does not command any following, which is very important in these days of alliances and coalition politics.

Indeed newspaper reports and media analysis is very clear on the unsuitability of Rahul Gandhi. Indeed even parties opposed to BJP, either part of UPA or from third front are not too enamoured of Rahul Gandhi. However Congress party is wedded to dynasty even if it comes at its own peril. Somehow Congress party, which is a party of intellectuals, historically, has a blinkered view and is unable to see what is obvious to every body outside Congress. Of course, Rahul Gandhi has fan following in BJP, because Rahul Gandhi is self goal by Congress, making BJP's task so easy and making it almost impossible for BJP to lose.

Of course had Rahul Gandhi been any other person he would perhaps not even be an MP. But he has the dynasty. But a dynasty in democracy is an antithesis. However being realistic one needs to take a nuanced view on dynasty and know that dynasty will always matter in every profession and especially in politics even in a democracy.

However dynasty is no excuse for incompetence and inability and proven failure. Dynasty may give head start, which is excusable and even understandable, but Dynasty should not replace merit, or as in this case allow lack of merit to be entirely ignored.

So here is final one sentence verdict, and this is being echoed by one and all, outside of Congress party, and is by no means opinion of the author of this paper, that Rahul Gandhi is singularly responsible for decimation of Congress party since 2014.

Congress party decline since 1989 and Rise of BJP since 1989

Congress party has had varying fortunes since independence. However BJP or Jana Sangh was always a marginal party. In 1984 BJP won only 2 seats. In 1951 Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS) just won 3 seats and in 1957, BJS won 4 seats, and in 1962 elections BJS just won 14 seats and in 1967, BJS just won 35 seats and in 1971 elections BJS just won 22 seats. Thus BJP or Jana Sangha has always been a very marginal player in politics.

What happened after 1989, where its seats increased from 2 to 85 and then in 1991 when BJP's seats increased to 120 and then in 1996 BJP's seats increased to 161 and in 1998 BJP's seats increased to 182 and in 1999 BJP got 182 seats. Of course we will not discuss later, because that sees Congress rise in 2004 and 2009 and decline since then for reasons discussed earlier.

Is it that BJP's Hindutva started to become more popular. That seems to be opinion of some people. However that is not true because RSS, the ideological mother of BJP is still a very marginal organisation, with less than 1 million members in a nation with more than 1 billion people. So clearly Hindutva or Hindu Nationalism is not appealing.

Then what went wrong after 1984.

Of course there was Mandal and other issues. But that only explains decline of Congress, but does not explain stupendous and exponential rise of BJP. Why did BJP rise after 1984.

Here is counter intuitive reason, that many people fail to fathom.

And that is that Congress started to play the Hindutva card. Rajiv Gandhi started to play Hindutva card to balance perhaps Muslim appeasement in Shah Bano case, by opening up the Ram Janmabhoomi temple and allowing Ramayana serial on TV and clandestinely collaborating with RSS.

People would assume that Congress playing Hindutva card and moving away from secularism would attract staunch Hindu votes away from BJP while allowing Congress to retain its core votes.

However that is not how it works.

When Congress was a secular party and BJP or Jana Sangh was a Hindutva party, they were two parties in two different categories. Both had a different space in mind of the voter.

But after Congress joined the Hindutva band wagon and BJP continued with Hindutva band wagon, then Congress became second in Hindutva category having abandoned the secular category.

Now if voters had to choose between BJP's Hindutva and Congress Hindutva they would obviously prefer BJP's Hindutva, since now there was no secular choice, since Congress abandoned that position.

In this it is pertinent to study the ideas of POSITIONING in marketing management. Positioning is how a product or service creates a category in mind of customer.

For instance Roll Royce is in luxury car segment whereas Fiat is in budget car segment.

Coca Cola is trusted by generations whereas Pepsi Cola is for the younger generation

Apple is premium mobile phone whereas Samsung is cheaper mobile phone.

A product or service always has to be first in a category. The customer does not prefer a product or service that is second in a category. Hence a product or service has to create a category for itself.

So Roll Royce cannot go into budget segment because it is luxury segment and in budget segment, Rolls Royce cannot compete with Fiat and other cars.

Similarly Congress party had its strengths in secular category, but when Congress shifted to Hindutva category after 1984, it became second in category of Hindutva where BJP had a great lead and Congress had abandoned its positioning of Secularism.

So when the voter was faced with only one category of Hindutva, then the voter started preferring the BJP over the Congress. Thus Congress by adopting Hindutva and abandoning secularism, actually put itself second to BJP and thus gave BJP a window, when BJP did not have any such window for almost 40 years after independence.

So the rise of BJP and decline of Congress since 1989 is solely due to error of Congress party playing the Hindutva card.

How to Revive Congress

The solution for reviving Congress lie in undoing the mistakes it has made.

The first and biggest and most humongous mistake is Rahul Gandhi.

Congress party should abandon and drop Rahul Gandhi like hot potato. That itself will increase Congress party seats by almost 100 and reduce BJP seats by almost 150. Thus Congress party will come to power and BJP will be displaced.

Secondly Congress party must go back to Secularism and entirely abandon Hindutva. Thus Congress will be in Secular category and BJP in Hindutva category and since voters don't seem to like RSS a lot, voters would abandon BJP which is political wing of RSS.

Finally Congress party should strategize to maximize number of seats it wins rather than maximize number of seats it contests. It is better for Congress to contest 225 seats and win 175 seats rather than contest 450 seats and win just 45 seats. Congress party should only contest seats where it has at least 25% vote share. This may mean that Congress does not contest in Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi. In other states Congress should collaborate with like minded parties so that secular votes don't get divided.

But first and foremost Rahul Gandhi must go.

References

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