

## India: The Congress Party's existential crisis

Monday 2 March 2015, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2015).

It's a telling comment on the state of the Indian National Congress that a four-member committee it appointed four months ago to devise a strategy to rejuvenate the party and fight the Modi government has turned out a non-starter.

The failure is particularly grave coming as it does immediately after the Congress's rout in Delhi, which it had ruled for 15 years, but where its vote fell from 25 percent in December 2013 to 15 percent in May last to 9.7 percent last fortnight. Since then, the party has again been battered in one Lok Sabha and six Assembly byelections in various states including West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, and in local body elections in Assam.

The "research and coordination committee's" four members—Indian Institute of Management-Bangalore professor MV Rajeeva Gowda, former Delhi MP Sandeep Dikshit, party spokesperson Randeep Surjewala, and former Mumbai MP Sanjay Nirupam—cannot decide who should head it.

The committee's appointment had raised hopes that the Congress would be given a more honest appraisal of the reasons for its debacle in the last Lok Sabha and subsequent elections than the shoddy cover-up job that former defence minister AK Antony routinely does—blaming all conceivable factors and individuals, barring the party's top leadership. But that was not to be.

Meanwhile, however, some other Congress leaders, notably Rajya Sabha MP Jairam Ramesh and former tribal affairs minister Kishore Chandra Deo, have voiced grave concern at the post-defeat turbulence in the party and its leadership crisis. Mr Ramesh has rightly said that what the Congress faces isn't an electoral crisis, but "an existential crisis": "We are fast losing time... We have lost huge ground. We are no longer a premium product. Congress is now a deep-discount bond..."

This acknowledgment would mark a big step forward if it produces a radical break with the Congress's ostrich-like refusal to recognise that beneath its descent from 206 Lok Sabha seats to a mere 44 (almost 100 seats below its lowest score of 141 until 2014) is not a tactical error, failure to communicate, or campaign-related mistake, but its disconnect from the people. It has had no political strategy and no appeal to any social group that matters. And it made all the wrong alliances.

Yet, Mr Ramesh says the Aam Aadmi Party won a stunning victory in Delhi because it ran away with "Rahul Gandhi's platform and agenda": "... The lessons to be learnt are door-to-door campaigning, bringing new faces and a level of empathy with the people, shunning arrogance and the trappings of power, nimble-footedness in communication, accessibility and visibility of leadership... We have to be less arrogant and preoccupied with ourselves."

Mr Deo demands that the party discuss where the leadership went wrong and how it could have done things differently. He has blamed "rootless wonders and spineless creepers" for the Congress's defeat and said things wouldn't have come to such a pass if Mr Gandhi had "ensured implementation of half the promises made after he became vice-president." But Mr Deo too ends up appealing to Mr Gandhi and his sister to "emancipate" the Congress from the clutches of those who have taken over the party organisation and led it to defeat.

This analysis focuses on tactical issues. It misses the vitally important point that the Congress's crisis is comprehensive and multi-dimensional: a crisis of ideological identity, a programmatic crisis, a crisis of political strategy and mobilisation, an organisational crisis, and a crisis of leadership. They together get reflected in poor alliance-making, incoherent campaigning, and electoral losses.

Simply put, the Congress is no longer what it used to be in its heyday: a multi-class and -caste, broadly left-leaning party with an umbrella-like character, and with roots in numerous mass organisations like trade unions and associations of women, professional groups, etc. Many poor people could identify with the Congress because it advocated growth with equity.

Since the 1970s, the old base of the Congress has splintered with the rise of the middle and low castes (Other Backward Classes) and Dalits. They gravitated towards caste-based regional parties like the Samajwadi Party, Janata Dal, Rashtriya Janata Dal and Bahujan Samaj Party in numerous states.

This denuded the Congress of its mass character, and sent it into a long phase of decline between the late 1980s and the first years of the new century. The Congress returned to national power in 2004, but on a thinner base, without building a strong, committed poor or subaltern constituency.

For the past decade, the Congress has explicitly refashioned itself as a party committed to growth without equity, which would pursue neoliberal policies favourable to predatory private capital. The Manmohan Singh dispensation catered to a largely middle/upper-middle class urban constituency, and the rural upper castes, whose support was weak and fickle.

It also tried, feebly, to cultivate sections of the poor through modest rights-based programmes like the Public Distribution System for food, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Right to Education, National Rural Health Mission, etc. The programmes' purpose was to compensate the poor for the deprivations they suffer under neoliberal policies.

Such "compensatory neoliberalism"-based approaches have become less and less important; their budgets have been pruned in the name of targeted delivery, cash transfers, and reducing subsidies. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance in its second term undermined their positive effects by mounting a huge assault on the rights of the poor to water, forests and land (*jal, jangal, zameen*) by handing over natural resources and mineral rights to corporations.

This substantially lost the Congress the support of the poor. Instead of trying to regain it, the party turned rightwards, to the middle class. On this terrain, it competed with the Bharatiya Janata Party and imitated it by sealing sweetheart deals with Big Business—by diluting environmental regulations and making huge tax concessions running annually into \$80 billion.

This became starkly evident in December 2013 when Mr Gandhi tried to placate FICCI by boasting that he had removed an obstacle to growth by changing the minister (Jayanthi Natarajan), who had in the perception of businessmen delayed environmental clearances. Cultivating a business-friendly image at the expense of vulnerable people will never help the Congress recover lost popularity. It must take up an agenda based on equity, social and ecological justice and expanded civil, social and economic rights for the underprivileged if it wants to regain relevance.

What AAP's sweep of Delhi proves is how compellingly attractive this agenda remains even for a relatively prosperous region like the national capital, whose per capita income is two-and-a-half times higher than the national average and seven times higher than Bihar's. Indeed, the greatest lesson from Delhi is the crucial importance of a poor-centred coalition, besides grassroots consultation, and popular mobilisation along the Left's classic approach.

The Delhi result totally demolishes the half-baked theory that the poor have become so “aspirational”—and so convinced of the fairness of existing social arrangements under which they will get justice if only they work hard—that they don’t want subsidies.

Indian society remains hideously unequal, hierarchical and prejudiced against the powerless, and has extremely low social mobility. So programmes of affirmative action, income support, affordable healthcare and education, and social security are absolutely imperative. The Congress has forgotten this and is chasing a chimera as it competes with the BJP.

The Congress has got its ideology and policy thrust all wrong. Unless it corrects this, it cannot get its politics right. That means cleansing the party of its pro-corporate right-wing leaders like Messrs Manmohan Singh, P Chidambaram, Kamal Nath and others, and embracing a left-leaning programmatic perspective.

It also means democratising the Congress, changing its internal functioning and freeing it of dependence on one family—no matter how able and charismatic its leadership. As it happens, Mr Gandhi is anything but astute or charismatic. He follows a weird political calculus, based on the illusory, arrogant presumption that the Congress is inherently popular and can win elections without alliances in the Hindi heartland.

That’s why he broke up the Congress alliance with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and RJD last year, which would have won a comfortable majority, and handed Jharkhand on a platter to the BJP. He has repeatedly done the same thing in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the past without comprehending the social dynamics or political equations that prevail there—to disastrous effect.

Earlier, Mr Gandhi tried to rebuild the Congress organisation through the rotten instrument of the Youth Congress by holding elections rather nominating office-bearers. Most posts were captured by the sons and daughters of Congress bandicoots using money power. The experiment flopped.

There’s no easy way out of the Congress’s crisis. But the party can only be revived and made viable on a left-of-centre platform, the space for which has expanded thanks to the BJP’s recent growth. The Congress would commit a historic blunder by squandering this opportunity.

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\*<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2015/03/01/Beyond-Congress%E2%80%99s-Leadership-Failure%3A-An-existential-crisis>