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The past and future of the Congress party

Ramachandra Guha

In the year 1970, Rajni Kothari published a major book with the straightforward title *Politics in India*. The bulk of the book was devoted to the then dominant Congress party. Kothari argued that before and after Independence, the Congress was successful in presenting itself as the “authoritative spokesman of the nation as well as its affirmed agent of criticism and change”.

The reasons for Congress hegemony were several. The party was a broad church, containing many shades of opinion within it. It had a strong presence in all states of the Union.

It had been led by towering personalities — Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, Patel — men of charisma and character who decisively shaped the country’s political discourse. The Congress imprint was so substantial that even its rivals had to work within the ideological parameters set by the party and its leaders. Thus, most parties who opposed the Congress still upheld welfarism, religious pluralism, and non-alignment in foreign policy.

Kothari was writing in the aftermath of the 1967 elections, when the Congress’s countrywide dominance was seriously threatened for the first time. The party retained power at the Centre, but lost in as many as eight states. Yet, as Kothari demonstrated, the Congress remained ‘the preponderant political force in the country’. For in six of the states that the Congress lost, the government was led by a former Congressman!

Towards the end of his book, Kothari offered one judgement and one prediction. This was the judgement: “Because the Congress managed to be in power continuously and there was no united or effective threat to its authority, the country’s political process gained incomparable advantages of continuity and unity.”

And this the prediction: “The Congress is still, and is likely to be for a long time, the most organized political party in the country, with a nationwide following and considerable depth in the localities. This has two consequences central to the system’s functioning: it will continue to enjoy plurality at the centre and thus a dominant voice in coalition-making; and it will continue to control widespread local power and patronage even where it is no longer in power at the state level.”

Kothari’s book makes for interesting (and curious) reading today, when the Congress is at the nadir of its influence in national politics. The party was humiliated in the 2014 general elections, when it won a mere 44 seats. It has been reduced to a rump in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan — major states where it was once the natural party of governance. In its former stronghold of Andhra Pradesh it is more or less invisible. In its other stronghold of Maharashtra, it seems set to lose — and probably lose badly — the assembly elections scheduled later in the year.

The Congress's decline is very much of its own making. The party's high command culture has inhibited the growth of vigorous state units. With chief ministers and PCC heads appointed (or dismissed) from Delhi, there is no incentive for talented leaders to cultivate grassroots support within their own state.

Kothari's book was published before the Congress converted itself into a family firm.

This happened in 1975, when Indira Gandhi assigned a major political role to her son Sanjay. Ever since (with the exception of the period 1991-98), this has been a party led by the Nehru-Gandhis. However, it now seems clear that, in electoral terms, the family's allure and appeal is steadily diminishing, for three reasons:

First, the young who make up an ever growing share of the electorate do not remember the (very real) charisma of Nehru and Indira; Second, the young do not remember the brutal assassinations of Indira and Rajiv either; Third, in an increasingly aspirational society, one cannot invoke the memory of one ancestors to justify one's own pre-eminence.

These structural factors are compounded by the weaknesses as a leader of the heir presumptive, Rahul Gandhi. Lacking in energy and ambition, he may be the first member of his family not to command the respect even of his own party colleagues. In the decade he has been in politics, Mr Gandhi has conspicuously failed to motivate cadres (and voters) while campaigning in state (and national) elections.

There seem to have been four distinct phases in Indian political history. The 'Congress system' that Rajni Kothari identified continued till 1989. For a full four decades since Independence, the Congress was almost continuously in power at the Centre, as well as in many states. The years 1989 to 1998 were a period of transition. Congress dominance weakened across India, as parties based on regional, religious, caste and class identities won elections and ran governments in state after state.

The years 1998 to 2014 saw the emergence of a bipolar polity. This was a consequence of the rise to national prominence of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The two poles were constituted by the Congress and the BJP respectively, around each of which smaller parties clustered.

The 2014 general elections appear to have inaugurated a fourth phase. It is too early to say whether we will once more witness the emergence of one-party dominance at both Central and state levels, of a 'BJP system' rather than a 'Congress system'. However, it is very hard to see how the Congress — in its present form — can radically improve its fortunes any time soon. Perhaps it will go the way of the British Liberal Party, a party that once shaped its nation's destiny that reduced itself to a marginal player in its nation's affairs.

Ramachandra Guha's most recent book is Gandhi Before India You can follow him on Twitter at @Ram_GuhaThe views expressed by the author are personal.