



Ideology of the Congress and Social Cleavage Theory transform the Freedom Movement into the Organization of Major Political Party

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to look into the brief historical background of the Congress Party prior to independence, its ideological appeal and the impact of social cleavage theory on its transformation into the major political party of India after independence. At the end of the nineteenth century, it emerged as an all-embracing mass organization accommodating all section of society. In view of its catch-all character, it came to be considered as having no counterparts in the world and representing every conceivable interest and type of personality. But, after dominating Indian politics for many decades, it lost its eminence and now is not performing well in parliamentary as well as assembly elections in the country due to the crises of the leadership quality at its apex level.*

Key Words: *ideological, cleavage, transformation, umbrella, bourgeoisie.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

India's leading political party, the Congress Party (also known as Congress (I) or Indian National Congress and usually abbreviated as INC) is the oldest political party not only in India but also in whole of the developing World of Afro-Asian countries (Brass 1990, p.64, Chand, 1995, p. 242, Narang, 1997, p.392). The Congress Party was formed in 1885 by British Civil Servant Allan Octavian Hume with W.C Banerjee as its first President (Sharma and Chand, 2009, p. 117). The founding of the Congress Party was similar on the line of the British Labour Party, therefore, the influence of the later prevails on its functioning up to two decades from its formation. In initial years, the Congress mainly served the interest of English speaking educated classes in India and plays an important role to bridge the gap between the English administration and the common Indian masses. Later Gandhi ji turned Congress into a mass movement and provide platform for the achievement of freedom (Awasthy, 1999, p. 324).

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The objective of this paper is to analyze the role of the Congress Party in the freedom movement and due to its "umbrella" or "catch-all" character, it became the major political party of India after independence. The major questions we seek to answer are:

- To assess the role of the Congress movement during pre-independence period.
- To assess the impact of the ideology and social cleavages, which transform the Congress Party into the major political party after independence.
- To look into various reasons which are responsible for the downfall of the Congress Party over time.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

In the initial years of its formation, the Congress mainly served the interest of English speaking educated class of India. However, the Congress remained as the party of bourgeoisie interest, as it was used by the middle class educated person to solve their grievances with English administrators. It was only, after 1899 that it started working as political organization with the objective of attaining independence. With this motive, it emerged as an all-embracing mass organization accommodating all section of society from capitalists to communist, feudalists to socialists, reactionaries to revolutionaries and from conservative to radical. In view of its catch-all character, it came to be considered as having no parallels in the world and representing every conceivable interest and type of personality (Nuna, 1989, p.88).



A few years down the line, the demands of INC became more radical in the face of constant opposition from the government, and the party became very active in the independence movement. By 1907, the party was split into two halves: the *Garam Dal* (literally "hot faction") of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, or Extremists, and the *Naram Dal* (literally "soft faction") of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, or Moderates, distinguished by their attitude towards the British. Under the influence of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the Congress became the first integrated mass organization in the country, bringing together millions of people against the Britishers. The Congress Party was the only political party to provide harmony to all the sects of the Indian society (Sharma, 1959).

After the First World War, the party became associated with Mahatma Gandhi, who remained its unofficial, spiritual leader and mass icon even as younger men and women became party president. Gandhiji turned Congress into mass movement and a platform for achieving freedom (Davar, 2019). Gandhiji also believed in social equality and he founded socialism on the bases of trusteeship, human equality, non-possession and non-violence (Ghose 1975, p.162). The party was in many ways an umbrella organization, sheltering within itself radical socialists, traditionalists and even Hindu and Muslim conservatives, but all the socialists (including the Congress Socialist Party, Krishak Praja Party, Swarajya Party members) were expelled along with Subhas Chandra Bose in 1939 by Gandhiji (Dua, 1967). The catch-all character of the Congress party continued even after independence. The party developed its ideology as federal, flexible and non-conformist. It is in response to this factor that party emerged as an all-embracing political entity. As long as no change took place in the original character of the party, therefore, it performed well in the parliamentary as well as assembly elections held at different points of time after independence in India.

3. IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL CLEAVAGES:

Congress party was the spearhead of the freedom movement, sharing the glory and the triumph of Indian Nationalism. It was supported during the pre independence period by a broad coalition of interest including the rising intellectual, elite and business class and enjoyed genuine popularity. Under Nehru's leadership, the party pursued a policy of democratic socialism in domestic arena and non alignment in foreign affairs. The key element of party's democratic socialism relied upon the series of national Five-Year Plans.

Despite the verbal emphasis on socialism and focus on the planned economy, larger private sector continued to exist and even flourished during the Congress rule. The Congress is also a party of social reform, seeking to eliminate pattern of caste discrimination and increase opportunities for self advancement by the disadvantaged. As mildly left of the centre party, the Congress was able to retain broad supports from peasant, workers and number of lower castes without alienating the business class as a whole.

To the social cleavage theory of party systems, the Indian parties, especially the Indian National Congress is anomalous in nature. Religion, language, caste, class and ethnic differences fragmented Indian society into many groups. It makes relatively complete claims on individuals, therefore, the Congress is the only party which claims the largest share of the voters in the country during many elections. So, the Congress party, occupying the ideological centre of Indian politics, still occupying to be a catch-all party, cutting into all social cleavages (Kirchheimer, 1966, p.184). In the western experience, religious, linguistic, ethnic, economic and regional differences provided social cleavage around which organizations especially political one developed (Dahl 1966, Lapalombair and Weiner 1966, Lispet and Rokkan, 1967).

Congress party is as fractured as the social cleavage theory of party systems would predict from the heterogeneity of Indian society. In term of supporter, the social bases vary from region to region. Therefore, the Congress party is a coalition of state and local parties which differ substantially among themselves in groups and interest they represent. Due to this character, it is described as a heterogeneous national party, representing all groups is formally accurate but substantively misleading (Kothari 1964). It is a collection of state-based factions linked not by individual in constituency but by elite. The division of Indian society is clear at state and the local level; but at national level such type of division is ambiguous which reveals that the party appears as a consensus party and it represents only local not national interests.

Congress party is known for its distinct amorphous character. It has been like an umbrella organization having men of all shades under its huge cover. It has been thus described as an omnibus organization. Its character as heterogeneous catch-all centrist party is a legacy of its role played during the freedom struggle under the charismatic leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. (Johari 1981 pp 831-32, Saxena 1999, p.264). Existing as coalition of interest, support for the Congress cut across major ethnic, regional and class barriers (Diamond et.al., 1986). Not due to its heterogeneous catch-all party character but because its role in the independence movement allows it to sweep up and retain voters and groups who were first mobilized into mass politics. The dominance of the party reflects the status and legitimacy of the state itself, while its opposition remains unable to claim such historic past, is left to represent the nuances of dissent (Kothari 1964, p.1164) and innovation within the broad political consensus which the Congress



party forged and now represents. Indeed, Congress's strategy during the pre independence period favoured arrangement of support through traditional social categories, rather than through class or other secular or functional categories. The Congress Party that has always been continuously in power at the centre and in a number of the states around for many decades. So due to its continuous dominance, the Indian party system has been known or called as 'one party dominance system'. The Congress party was "Party of Consensus" while the opposition parties were "Parties of Pressure" (Kothari (1964, pp.1161-73 and Das Gupta and Morris-Jones,1975, p.23). They considered this fact that Congress party alone actually in the practices to substantially effect all parts of the country. They also remained unable to explain the nature of party support whether it is regional concentrated or well established equally in various part of the country.

So, the Congress emerges as a party that represents not national but local interest also. The bases of support to Congress party were large and multiple. The Congress party has a relatively more heterogeneous and different economic, social and demographic support bases to the other political parties which are in the political arena of India. It is the main centrist party in India whose policies are neither rightist nor leftist. The pre-independence experiences of the nationalist movement also shaped this organization that could be transferred rapidly into a political party. Its early success as a political party was congruent with the demonstrated ability of the nationalist movement to mobilize disparate groups into a unified coalition. The devolved nature of the Congress organization required for the successful articulation of a national movement in a regionally diverse, contrary meant that Congress was well prepared for the transition to a federal system and the associated state party system (Manor 1990, p.28). In the past, the most notable feature of Congress support has been its evenness both geographical and social. It appeared to have drawn its support equally from all parts of the spectrum and this gave Indian politics the appearance of politics without distinctive social cleavage (Heath and Yadav, 1999, p. 2518). In popular wisdom the Congress was seen as a party that always drew upon captive 'vote bank' especially among the socially disadvantaged groups. The Scheduled Caste has been traditionally supported to the Congress Party. As Weiner (1983, p.124) noted 'India's ex-untouchables or as they are officially called Scheduled Caste, are traditionally associated with India's Congress party as American's Blacks are with Democratic party. Their association with Congress goes back to pre-independence era when Mahatma Gandhi won their support and has been matured by successive Congress leaders e.g. Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi'. Congress leader explicitly appeal to the Indian poor, and through its commitment to reservation in education and employment and variety of social programmes, the party has sought the support of Scheduled Castes.

Congress remains an important vote bank for the Congress. Due to its secular character Congress also remained able to capture the Muslim community votes and they have generally supported the Congress party primarily because of the patronage. The ruling party commands and wide spread feeling that the Congress would better protect and favour Muslims than would some less secular minded party. Congress was able to evolve durable electoral bases across castes and to maintain its image as the only and truly national party. This winning combination of 'caste politics' and nationalist ideology secured the Congress party a dominant position in Indian politics for many decades after independence (Kothari 1964). However, the Congress party rarely used the dichotomies as upper caste vs. lower caste or capitalist vs. working class in its political discourse.

4. REASONS FOR THE DOWNFALL OF THE CONGRESS PARTY:

The Congress party projects its politics and programmes at national level as representing national aspirations of the Indian people. At regional level, the party consolidates its social base by endorsing the power of the numerically strong and upwardly mobile dominant but traditionally of lower status caste of land owing peasants e.g., the *Jats* in Utter Pradesh and Haryana; *Patidars* in Gujarat; the *Reddy* in Andhra; and the *Marathas* in Maharashtra etc. The Congress party dominated politics of social consensus, presided over by the hegemony of an upper caste, the English educated elite class came to an end. The Congress organization remained unable to maintain the system of vertical management of region-caste factions. Since mid 1970s through the 1980s large sections of lower strata of social group abandoned the Congress and constituted themselves into shifting alliance of their own political parties. The vertical arrangement of the region-caste factions that Congress had perfected just collapsed. The emergence of backward caste as a political force has been associated with the decline of the Congress. While the middle and lower middle castes kept on moving away from the Congress from 1967 onwards, Congress struck to its policy of putting up a coalition of upper castes, minorities, dalits and adivasis (Vora and Palshikar, 2004, p.36). The rise of parties such as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and Bhujan Samajvadi Party (BSP) which do more or less appealing to distinctive social groups, indicated the rise of cleavage-based politics in India. The decline of the Congress pointed out the failure of catch-all party to handle cleavage-based pressure. The Congress party historically had garnered a majority to the forward and backward caste votes. But after showing favour to the Mandal Commission, it would then lose the support of forward castes.



Changes in the Indian party system have focused on the electoral decline of the Congress party and the end of the Congress system. The party's electoral success over the years has been attributed to its ability to represent all sections of society and more importantly contain the various social divisions that provide Indian society through centrist policies (Kothari 1964, Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). The main causes of decline of the Congress were its inability to hold its catch-all coalition together to the organization of the party and excessive influence of its national leaders particularly Indira Gandhi. The main cause of the Congress's decline since 1972 was the absence of intra-party election. Due to the absence of intra-party election and prominent role played by the national leaders led to the erosion of the base of an organization that had been seen as a key to the earlier electoral success of party. As a result of this, the party remained unable to face the emergence of challenges. The political parties that have succeeded Congress are Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, AIDMK in Tamil Nādu, SP and BSP in Uttar Pradesh, JD in Bihar etc. All these regional parties have well established organization in these states. The emergence of cleavage-based party system in contemporary Indian politics is marked by an increased turnout in state level elections. This mobilization and turnout have increased in state level elections since 1991 (Yadav, 1996). This development is understandable when catch-all party is replaced by political parties rooted in social cleavages. As the aggregative party begins to lose supporters, other parties begin to mobilize support actively. As ethnically based political parties become politically salient, they unlike Congress take policy positions closer to the interests of particular groups. The Congress did have a different social profile in different states that was acquired and cultivated through active political mobilization. Other parties picked up those votes that Congress failed to retain. The situation is adverse today. If the social profile of Congress voter varies according to the nature of the political competition it faces, it is not because Congress has adopted different tactics as well as different political opponents. In the decade of 1990s, the sectional mobilization has been with non-Congress parties. So, the historical experience of umbrella parties suggests that, since they have no distinctive groups to appeal, they are particularly depending upon their image, issues, and perceived records of governance. Today Congress finds that in a wider spread public perception it lacks on all these tactics. Regional loyalties, interest and inspiration started holding precedence over the national loyalty and interest. Due to this, the regional based parties in different states have been originated. This led to the requisite sustenance of ethnicity and territoriality. In this way rise of region-based state parties gradually weakened the monolithic political culture vis-à-vis the Congress Party. The INC in the region has suffered successive split base on frontier character of the perception of the people. So, with the fluctuating hold of the Congress Party vis-à-vis the declining monistic political polity or culture and rising hold of the regional based political parties, the nature of Indian federalism in 1970s underwent some structural changes (Adhikari, 1997, pp. 303-312). So, the coalition polity/culture does not seem to be geographically static at national level because it can provide an alternative state idea which help their origin, because every regional political parties in the coalition polity are very much conscious of their regional distinctiveness rather than national loyalty and interest.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The mass mobilization character of the Congress party continued even after independence to develop an ideology which was federal, flexible and non-conformist. Such a heterogeneous character of this party is a legacy of its role played during the freedom struggle under the charismatic leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Ideologically, the party is committed to secularism, socialism & democracy and is the main centrist party in India whose policies are neither rightist nor leftist. The party fares relatively better among less educated, lower caste, middle and lower income and rural groups. Due to its secular character Congress also remained able to capture the Muslim community votes. It remains an important vote bank for the Congress. This winning combination of 'caste politics' and nationalist ideology secured the Congress party a dominant position in Indian politics for many decades after independence. In the western experience, religious, linguistic, ethnic, economic and regional differences provided social cleavage around which organizations especially political one developed. To the social cleavage theory of party systems in India, the Congress party seems to be anomalous in nature. The Congress Party is known for its distinct amorphous character. It has been like an umbrella organization having men of all shades under its huge cover. Religion, language, caste, class and ethnic differences fragmented Indian society into many groups. So, the Congress party, occupying the ideological centre of Indian politics, still occupying to be a catch-all party, cutting into all social cleavages, which underlines the "umbrella" or "catch-all" character of the party. The party remained in power for many years after independence and suffered its first taste of electoral defeat at the national level in 1977 due to exigencies of emergency. But again, the Congress came back to power with huge majority in the general elections of 1980. The Congress, meanwhile, enjoyed a parallel increase in mobilization among the young youth in 1984 election after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, but party remained unable to retain their support on its own in the subsequent



elections and only came to power after making coalition with many regional parties under the banner of UPA in the general elections of 2004 and 2009.

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