

# Grand Old Party & Its Grand Illusions

## Five party myths explain why Congress is dying as a political force, as a symbol and as a concept

**Rahul Verma**



Decisions taken at the Congress Working Committee meeting on Sunday may offer a ray of hope to some, but not to this writer. It may be foolish to write an obituary of a political party almost twice older than India as a republic, but when the cure demands surgery, band-aid won't help.

Electoral reversals are routine in democracies, but Congress has been witnessing a structural decline for at least three decades. The party's leadership has yet not fully comprehended the depth of its organisation decline and ideational crisis. Congress not only shuns normal politics, but it takes a false moral high ground.

Whatever may be the party's projection of its electoral strength on paper, in reality, it is fast getting marginalised. A situation like this would have invited open rebellion in other parties of this standing.

There are comparable examples of how the Labour Party in Great Britain, the LDP in Japan, the Liberal Party in Canada, among others, have re-emerged from such a crisis.

But despite recent murmurs by several Congress leaders, we are unlikely to see any major vertical split in the near future. The possibility of a 1969 or 1978 sort of national split is very low as there are very few current leaders who can mobilise voters and also have resources to sustain such a formation in a lean period. However, regular attrition of Congress politicians at various levels may become a norm.

### When family becomes the party

The other reason is that Congress finds it extremely difficult to imagine a post-Gandhi future. The party for the past few decades has been living in a bubble that hampered its ability to do a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity and threat) analysis. Thus, it could not bring the necessary changes required in its ideological vocabulary, organisational structure and leadership positions at critical moments.

It is true that most political parties seek to cultivate a moral distinctiveness that drives partisan identifica-



Gone are the glory days

tion or political loyalty. Often, they do so by propagating certain meta-narratives that frame the essential nature or purpose of the party.

The meta-narrative is often rooted in factual events, but it slowly gets transformed into mythical ideas by vested interests. However, there comes a moment when those myths start producing diminishing returns. And this has precisely happened with Congress – the myth now makes no distinction between the party and the family.

### Ossified myths, diminishing returns

● The first myth places Congress in the historical context – the party alone led the freedom struggle or built modern India. It synonymises itself with electoral democracy. It believes only it can represent all sections – region, religion, caste and class. This myth remains part of Congress folklore despite its poor record in appointing Dalit, OBC or Muslim CMs. The party's record on federalism or ability to alleviate poverty is also not exceptional.

● The second myth is that Congress alone has made sacrifices for “national unity” and “national interest”. The tragic deaths of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, or the choice of Sonia Gandhi to not become the PM in 2004, are among several examples the party's rank and file

give to legitimise the idea.

● The third myth is that only Congress and the Gandhi family think about the poor, provide them with welfare and save them from feudal and capitalist classes. While the intent of many welfare schemes Congress government pushed were rooted in rights-based approaches, the party leadership has never shied from acting mai-baap sarkar. Less said the better about the Congress's connection with economic and feudal elites.

● The fourth myth is that Congress equates its ideological worldview with the “Idea of India”. The party believes that any other ideological position – Hindu right, socialist, communist, Ambedkarite, among others – have limited resonance. These other ideas might gain traction for some period in some places, but the Congress platform is what India truly needs.

● The fifth myth involves the illusion of being India's default governing party. Indira Gandhi was twice forced to move out of Congress (1969 and 1978) and her electoral success in elections after this lies at the heart of why Congress fails to imagine a future without Gandhis.

### Future entrapped in the past

The party, after being out of office nationally between 1996 and 2004, returned under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. The party however conveniently ignores the fact that its decline in the states continued. In many important states of India, Congress has not been in office for more than three decades.

What the party doesn't get is that while some of these elements of Congress mythology may have had some connect with Congress in pre-1969 or pre-1978, but not now. The new Congress now is a poor replica of its old-self.

What does the future portend for Congress? To use Yogendra Yadav's fine distinction of Congress as a political party, as a symbolic space, and as a concept that is a counterweight to BJP's political project – Congress as a party is dying a slow death, as a symbolic space it no longer represents the commanding force, and as a concept it has been reduced to a grand illusion.

*The writer is Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi*