

By Sidharth Mishra



When news the broke out last week about Chapra MP Rajiv Pratap Rudi being asked to resign from the Union Cabinet, memory of a similar exercise came rushing back. In 1986, then all powerful Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had undertaken a similar application – carrying out a reshuffle and asking his non-performing ministers to quit. Though Rajiv Gandhi commanded much larger a majority in Parliament (support of over 400 Lok Sabha members), but he wasn't as tough, or should we say wise, a politician as present Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Rajiv Gandhi had his hatchet man Arun Nehru ready for the job, the kind of role which Amit Shah plays. But there was difference, Shah holds position of party head and thus can summon a party Minister. Nehru was designated just a Minister of State, not even a Cabinet rank.

Since Rajiv was also party president, he took it on himself to summon the non-performing Ministers and express his annoyance. As the news reports published then mentioned, that the Ministers were asked to meet Arun Nehru on their way out. Nehru would ask them to sign on the dotted lines on their resignation letters. One among them was veteran Bihar Congress leader Abdul Ghafoor, who was state's chief minister at the height of Jaya Prakash Narayan's agitation. After hearing Rajiv Gandhi, he pulled out his resignation letter, which he was carrying, and said that he would rather give it to his Prime Minister than meet a constitutionally innocuous Arun Nehru. This news had great impact on the polity of Bihar. Ghaffoor's humiliation was taken as affront by the minority community and since then Muslims have voted in Bihar for Lalu Prasad Yadav, who always addressed the old man as Chacha (uncle) Ghaffoor. Another similarity between the two leaders is sidelining of party's old guard. Rajiv Gandhi on taking over took the first step of sidelining party's then politically most powerful leader Pranab Mukherjee. Narendra Modi did the same in the case of Lal Krishna Advani. But in the case of former, Mukherjee had age on his side, he bounced back and as they say rest is history. Gandhi also spoke loudly against the other members of the old guard, calling them brokers, at the Congress Plenary in Kolkata. Gandhi likewise rubbed then President Giani Zail Singh the wrong way, which made him nearly lose his job.

In less than three years, Gandhi was in defensive mode, with the old guard crawling its way back into the position of power. But while shaking the old guard, Gandhi also gave opportunity to a new breed of leaders – Madhav Rao Scindia, Rajesh Pilot, P Chidambaram, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Kamal Nath, Ahmed Patel, Digvijaya Singh, Jitendra Prasada and Margaret Alva among others. These leaders, though some among died young, managed to hold the party together after his death and some of them are currently in the forefront of the battle of survival which the

party is fighting. Rajiv Gandhi despite holding the position of huge political power could not carry out the change of guard, which the present Prime Minister is doing. It sometimes seems that Modi has taken greater lessons from the tenure and politics of Rajiv Gandhi than his son Rahul Gandhi. While the Prime Minister espouses an agenda of development and progress, so similar in grammar to the manifesto of Rajiv Gandhi's Congress, Rahul Gandhi roots for regressive 'kisan' politics.

Congress vice-president little realizes that the Indian agrarian social structure is dominantly caste-based which cannot be welded into a single entity whatever be the process of agricultural reforms. The best way to overcome the caste divide is to push for industrialization and consequent urbanization. The caste divide of rural India melts seamlessly into the labour colonies of urban India.

The suggestion is not against amelioration of the state of agriculture in the country but an advise against having 'kisan' as the fulcrum of the national politics. A country which has a rapid growth rate of internet literacy thanks to "Google Baba" cannot be any further held to ransom by the culture of subsidies and licenses, something which Rahul Gandhi's father also wanted to do away with.

Narendra Modi's credential as a 'transformative' Prime Minister will need approbation of history as three years is a small period in a nation's politics and a politician's life to judge one's contribution. But certainly there is little doubt that Narendra Modi did not start from a position of political bonhomie, as was the case with Rajiv Gandhi. He benefitted immensely from the sympathy wave caused by the unfortunate assassination of his mother.

Probably playing with this handicap, as they say in the golf, Modi has so far succeeded to remain close to par. His cause has been helped by a weak opposition where the Left is bereft of cadres and the Congress that of leader.

With a very 'professional' political manager as his party president, Modi unlike Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the BJP Prime Minister in NDA I Government, has insured that the party control has remained with him and not any Advani of his generation. He has ensured that 7 Lok Kalyan Marg remains the sole powerhouse of the politics of NDA II government.

Vajpayee government was akin to a tent colony with several camps, Modi régime resembles a huge pandal with one presiding deity and disciples with undivided devotion to the deity. Keeping dissidence in check and Opposition at bay after completing three years in office is certainly a case study in fine political management.

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