

By Sidharth Mishra



If one were to write about the moves to ‘revive’ the Congress using a Christian metaphor, one could say that the Mother Superior of a convent called the 10 Janpath has realised that its baptized inmates were not good enough to lead the congregation of the faithfuls. Having realised that she is into seeking help of monks from various monasteries to do a miracle to retain the herd of followers.

One such ‘miracle making monk’, who goes by the name of Prashant Kishor, has just refused to help as he knows that neither miracles happen in politics, nor he has miraculous powers. Congress president Sonia Gandhi may believe that her party like a human body is in the intensive care unit of a hospital and that a shot of life saving drug Coramine can revive it but then it’s a completely misplaced conclusion.

The poor health of the Congress party is due to its loss of presence at the grassroots. The grand old party’s own history is replete with instances and events which helped build it into an organisation with pan-India presence. If the party president is so keen on reviving the organisation may she take a leaf or two out of party’s archival papers.

Till the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the political scene in 1915, Congress had till then largely remained a body of urban intellectuals who lodged protest through writing petitions and agitating through the Press. One of the better known historians on Modern India, Bipan Chandra has written, “Nearly all the major political controversies of the day were conducted through the Press. It played institutional role of opposition to the Govt.”

Mahatma Gandhi took the party out from the debating societies and court libraries to the grassroots. He used two pronged strategy: one, he built the organisation from grassroots upwards, not just on paper but also in lime and mortar. No wonder all the old towns and cities of India still have a Congress Bhawan, though today the party might have lost relevance in the

politics of that particular region.

Second, the mass agitations he led in several parts of the country, which not only had regional diversity but also social-economic variability. If at Champaran in Bihar he was agitating for the farmers, at Ahmedabad in Gujarat he was raising the pitch for the textile workers. These agitations helped him create a leadership, which was to hold the Congress together for next three decades.

The best examples being Dr Rajendra Prasad being product of the Champaran agitation and Vallabhbhai Patel earning the epithet of Sardar during the Kheda and Ahmedabad protests. There were whole generation of leaders whom Gandhi encouraged to take command at local levels during the various mass agitation like non-cooperation, civil disobedience and Quit India movements, he led between 1917 and 1947.

Even Jawaharlal Nehru earned his spurs in a peasant movement in Avadh region led by a monk who went by the name of Baba Ramchandra. He set up Oudh Kisan Sabha with Nehru as a prominent member. Incidentally, Baba Ramchandra read passages from Ramayana during the political meetings encouraging the farmers to rise in the name of Lord Ram against the atrocities of the landlords.

One of the biggest change in the texture of the Congress post-independence has been loss of its ability to agitate. Being the biggest political organisation with pan-India presence Congress lived both on the network and network created by Mahatma Gandhi till about 20 years after his death. It was in 1967 that for the first time Congress lost assembly elections in several states.

However, the quick dismemberment of the Congress was then arrested or delayed due to the rise of Indira Gandhi as party's leader. Nehru's daughter's politics was different from that of her father. She was upfront, made bold moves and took rivals, howsoever strong or revered, headon. Through her style of politics, though she was able to keep the Congress's lime and mortar infrastructure together, she dismantled democratic foundations of the party.

The success story of the Congress in the past 50 years has largely been built on the disunity among the Opposition ranks. It has survived on breaking through ranks of the rival parties using all possible means. However, now faced with BJP, built with the concrete of ideology,

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organisation and strategy, Congress mortar and lime have frayed and the party gone into an unfathomable fall.

The BJP today has presence across the nation and a vibrant BJP office in almost all the towns and cities, whereas the majority of mouffossil level Congress Bhawans have turned into haunted houses. More than the Coramine, the Congress today needs someone to exorcise it of the ghost of inertia, status quo and free fall.

The party cannot be revived by playing opposition just in the media, refer to Bipan Chandra's observations above, and looking for strategists to do miracles. The party needs revitalisation at the grassroots, and the lessons for this are in plenty in party's own history. Gandhi name has brought Congress this far, now the time to adopt Gandhian ways once again to rebuild the party.

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