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Dynasty Politics as Manifestation of Weakness in Party Structures: ‘Delayed Succession’ of Indira Gandhi (1964-1977)

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Abstract:

This paper aims to locate the predecessor of Dynasty politics in India. Although at the beginning of her political career as the prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, was not the natural choice of Congress ‘big-man’. But she was chosen because they assumed that she might extend the charisma of Jawaharlal Nehru. Defying all assumptions about her political naivety, she proved to be a very popular leader, but at the cost of breaking down institutional mechanisms and hierarchies at various levels. This article, while trying to locate the roots of Dynasty politics in India have also tried to look at the concept of Single-party dominance system, institutions of governance at various levels, de-institutionalization process initiated by Indira Gandhi culminating in the much-debated declaration of Emergency in the nation, which otherwise has a long history of practiced Democracy in South-Asia.

Key words: Single-party dominant system, Democracy, Dynasty, Emergency

1. Indian Political System: Dominance of One Party

The Indian political system is largely characterized by a single-party dominant system, which for the most part has been dominated by the Congress Party. But in spite of it being a single-party dominant system, other political parties have quite made their presence felt in different phases of Indian political system. Underlining the importance of smaller parties Ramashray Roy states:

“A one-party dominance system does not preclude political competition, because minor national or regional parties constantly pose a threat to the dominant party, it only makes competition unequal. It is a system in which other parties exist legally but, for reasons largely unrelated to legal questions of government coercion, find themselves unable to challenge effectively the dominant party's hold on public power.”¹

However, many social scientists raise doubts about the viability of a democratic political system in developing countries where one political party dominates the political scene. As Shils argues, if the dominant party does not permit the growth of responsible opposition, on the one hand the party itself ages, becoming soft and perhaps "corrupt," and on the other hand it increasingly fails to satisfy public demands.² Edward Shils while commenting on India states:

“While the Congress-like party is in the saddle; it impedes the emergence of an opposition responsive to the possibility of succeeding to power through constitutional means and made responsible by that idea. Opposition is either discouraged by the odds against which it must contend or it is overwhelmed by coercion. Thus, the leadership of opposition either withdraws from politics or gravitates towards the extremist party.”

According to Donald V. Smiley, most writers on democratic politics have tended, to identify the prolonged dominance of one party with totalitarianism, such dominance does in fact exist in several communities that operate in the liberal tradition as well. In the world's most populous democracy the Indian Congress Party has dominated politics nationally and in most of the states since independence was achieved.³ But it had at times given way to other political parties through constitutional means alone. For example, the elections of 1977 which Indira Gandhi held after a brief period gave way to the formation of the Janata government. The most notable thing about the Congress in India is that it had developed itself into a ‘System’ in the first few years until 1967, when after that slowly the Congress system started breaking down. The Indian system can be described as a system of One-party dominance. It is a competitive party system but one in which the competing parts play various roles. It consists of a party of consensus and parties of pressure. The parties of pressure function on the margin. Inside the margin are various factions within the party of consensus. Outside the margin are several opposition groups and parties, dissident groups from the ruling party, and other

¹Ramashray Roy: Dynamics of One-Party Dominance in an Indian State, Asian Survey, Vol.8, No.7, Modernization in South Asian Studies: Essays in a changing field, July 1968.

² Edward Shils: Political Development in the New States. Comparative studies in Society and History, Vol.2, No.3 1960, pp 289.

³ Donald V. Smiley: The Two-Party System and One-Party Dominance in the Liberal Democratic State. The Canadian journal of Economics and Political Science, Vol.24, No.3, August 1954, pp 319.

interest groups and important individuals. These groups outside the margin do not constitute alternatives to the ruling party. Their role is to constantly pressurize, criticize and influence it by influencing opinion and interests inside the margin.⁴

But what is important to note is the trend that has arisen over the years of a single dynasty that has come to occupy the central space vis-à-vis other prominent leaders in the same party, that is, Congress. It is also important to note that the succession has not been always smooth. Although there has not been an attempt at violent overthrow of incumbent powers yet they had to struggle within the party to establish themselves. The prominence of Nehru in the post-independence period was quite apparent because of his active involvement in independence movement and also because of his preference by Gandhi over Patel; but the continuity of that Dynasty after the ascendance of Indira Gandhi to power is something important to note.

In the Post-independence period Nehru has tried his best to bring about Democracy in the way the party has functioned. For example Nehru tried to separate the Organizational and Governmental wing of the Congress.⁵ Nehru consistently held that the party organization could not expect the Prime Minister and his Government to be directly responsible to the party executive. "The Prime Minister or a Chief Minister," he noted, is the arch stone which forms the basis of a democratic structure. Once he is chosen he must have the full discretion left to him. If he does not command the confidence of the legislature, he must go.⁶ However, the Prime Minister's responsibility to the legislature did not extend to the party organization. Nehru considered it wholly unjustified to expect the Prime Minister to hold his post only so long as the party executive permitted him to remain in office. To do so, he argued, would reduce parliamentary democracy to a "mockery."

In the period after independence it was inevitably the Congress party who was to form the government because it was the party who was in the leading role to bring about independence to the country and also all the prominent leaders of the time were associated with this party. After independence there arose a conflict between party president and the prime minister. In India, the leadership of the National Congress was acutely aware of the problem of defining the role of the mass organization in relation to the new function of the party as government. Nehru, in particular, was convinced that functional separation of party and government was essential to democracy in India.

When Acharya Kripalani became the party president, the first since independence there arose a continuous conflict between the office of the prime minister and the office of the party president as to whether the prime minister will be responsible to the party president or whether the Prime minister will work independently of the organization. Kripalani's long association with the Congress central office had had a deep impact upon his conception of the potential importance of the party organization and its chief executive in policy-making for the nation. During his tenure as Congress President, such views brought him into frequent conflict with his senior colleagues in the government, for Kripalani insisted that all important decisions made by the Congress members of the Interim Government should be reached only in consultation with the Congress President and the Working Committee.

After Kripalani it was Dr. Rajendra Prasad who held the office for sometime. The next Congress president Pattabhi acknowledged in his Presidential Address at Jaipur, that the real "power" remained in the hands of the government, although the party could attempt to "influence" government decisions.

During the Nehru era, therefore, the executive organs of the Congress mass organization which had been the center of power in the pre-independence period, found to their frustration that their role had been undercut. In the years following the formation of the Interim Government in 1946, the mass organization was gradually subordinated to the needs of the new role of the party as government. The tension rose to such heights that Nehru himself took upon the post of the president of the organization while at the same time being the prime minister after the death of Patel in 1950 and continued up to 1954.

Once again it was evident that no Congress President could succeed in an attempt to hold the government responsible to the extra-parliamentary mass organization of the party. Moreover, in confirmation of the supremacy of the parliamentary wing, the Nehru government's program of social and economic reform was accepted by the party as a guideline for united Congress action, that is, a socialist structure of production where heavy industries and public enterprises will be the determinant of the economy. For three years after Nehru took upon as president of the party, he attempted to ensure party-government harmony by playing a double role as both Prime Minister and Congress President.

After Nehru's death in 1964, it was Kamaraj who took up as party president. Kamaraj proved to be a very successful manager of things. Because of his personal stature in the Congress and his position as Congress President, Kamaraj was called upon to carry out several important functions immediately after Nehru's death: he was given a grant of power from the Working Committee to determine the party consensus on Nehru's successor, he chaired the meeting of the Congress Party in Parliament at which a successor was elected. These were functions which were not available to the Congress president until Nehru's death. In fact, it was difficult to imagine the Congress Presidents of the previous decade providing such leadership and maintaining throughout the process, as Kamaraj did, the respect and confidence of the parliamentary wing. With the backing of the Syndicate in the congress Lal Bahadur Shastri became the second prime minister of Independent India. He was a close associate of Nehru and also not very different from him ideologically. After the charismatic rule of Nehru Shastri found it difficult to establish himself as a leader.⁷ It is also important to notice how during this period several moves of the Congress Party helped Indira to be recognized herself in the eyes of the world. As has been noted by Tariq Ali,

⁴Rajni Kothari: The Congress "System" in India, Asian Survey, Vol. 4, No.12, Dec 1964.

⁵Stanley A. Kochanek: The Indian National Congress: The distribution of power between Party and Government, the Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 25, No.4, August 1966

⁶Stanley A. Kochanek: The Indian National Congress: The distribution of power between Party and Government, the Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 25, No.4, August 1966

⁷Tariq Ali: The Nehrus and the Gandhis: an Indian Dynasty, 1985, published by Picador

“The new Prime Minister (Shastri) called on Nehru’s daughter to represent India at the commonwealth Prime Minister’s conference in 1964, and she subsequently visited France, USA, Yugoslavia, Canada, Mongolia and Burma. She was the first foreign politician to meet the men in Moscow who had deposed the ebullient Nikita Khrushchev. They reassured her that USSR policy towards India would not change one iota. In February 1965 she went to Moscow again on behalf of Shastri. This time it was her turn to reassure Moscow that Shastri’s indecision should not be interpreted as a movement away from non-alignment. These trips did not go unnoticed in India, where they enhanced her prestige both inside Congress and in the country as a whole.”

So the ground was prepared for her to take over the reins of power some day.

Shastri’s tenure came to a sudden end with his death in Tashkent. By the end of his tenure Shastri was almost successful in establishing himself as a leader after winning the war against Pakistan. He appeared far more decisive and all the signs were that on his return from Tashkent he intended to reshuffle the cabinet and choose his own ministers.

After the sudden death of Shastri the party was in a dilemma as to who is to be chosen as the next prime minister. Within forty-eight hours Morarji Desai had let it be known that he now expected the job. But the party bosses did not want him to be the leader as they wanted someone more compliant to their decisions. Kamaraj, who chose Indira as against Morarji Desai stated:

“She knows all the world leaders, has traveled widely with her father, has grown up amongst the great men of the freedom movement, has a rational and modern mind, is totally free of any parochialism- State, Caste or religion. She has possibly inherited her father’s scientific temper and above all in 1967 election she can win the election.”⁸

During this brief period the organizational wing appeared to be more powerful than the governmental wing. In January 1966, the Syndicate could not produce a consensus candidate nor could the Working Committee. Although eight chief ministers and Kamaraj finally declared themselves for Mrs. Gandhi, the CPP made the ultimate decision, electing her leader in a secret ballot on 19th January 1966. She defeated Morarji Desai because, according to the common assessment, he was personally unpopular, possessed of prodigious pride and stubborn in office.⁹ And also because it was the Organizational wing which was in her favor and she had the added advantage of being Nehru’s daughter. She won by 355 votes to Desai’s 169. Also, because Kamaraj and others believed they could control Mrs. Gandhi. Many in the party considered her a transitional prime minister until after the 1967 general elections. Thus, to survive politically Mrs. Gandhi faced the tasks that would confront any prime minister in similar circumstances. She had to assert her leadership within the government and lead the party to election victory.

2. Indira Gandhi’s Rise: The Precursor to Dynasty Politics

According to SudiptaKaviraj, nothing was less inevitable in modern Indian politics than Indira Gandhi’s rise to power.¹⁰ States Kaviraj, her coming to power was not dynastic, though subsequently it came misleadingly to appear that way. She was not groomed for premiership of India by Nehru for the simple reason that he could have foreseen his own death, but not Shastri’s. Even after Shastri’s death Indira Gandhi’s election to power did not lie in the logic of history in any sense, it was not made to happen by the logic of either political support, control over party machinery, personal charisma or personal intrigues. She was elevated to the leadership of the Congress party through a negative decision, in one of the most difficult periods of the party’s history, in the middle of a serious crisis of the Indian state. Two rather contrary reasons contributed to this -an impression of her weakness and ideological indistinctness, and an ability to metonymically extend the charisma of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Kaviraj claims that Indira Gandhi came to power because she appeared to have a set of paradoxical political qualifications, most significantly, of indistinctness and ambiguity which obviously is very contradictory to what she became in her later years. It was also possible for interest groups associated with the ruling elite to believe that she would make way after sometime for someone with clearer policy preferences, or if she survived she could be encouraged, pressured or persuaded into behaving the way they wanted her to behave.

To the Congress bosses she was a good candidate precisely because her symbolism of Nehru was in a sense false; she could, in their eyes, benefit from her connection with Nehru without any inheritance of his reformism. While making a comparison between her style of working and Nehru’s style of working Kaviraj states that during Nehru’s period Congress worked under two types of coalitional logic. The first was the Marxist form of class alliance where the socially and politically dominant forces joined hands. They were the higher castes and the rich peasantry. The second form of alliance was what Rajni Kothari defined as ‘Congress System’. The predominant fact of this model was the enormous space the ruling party occupied in the political system, reducing other parties to marginality. Around a central, disproportionately large party of consensus were arranged much smaller parties of pressure, which imposed a coalitional logic on both government and opposition political groups. The simple size, regional spread, and ideological diversity of the Congress turned it into a loose organization, with groups ideologically stretched across a spectrum from extreme right to mild radicalism. This method of the Congress brought it to the status of a single-party dominance system.

When Indira Gandhi came to power she was faced with multiple challenges, from her cornering within the party to the interrogation of Nehru’s policies after the defeat in the Chinese war. Under the pressure of a foreign exchange crisis, a sharp 36.5 per cent devaluation of the rupee had to be done. Internal pressure from business lobbies mounted for a more hospitable policy towards the private sector and western investment. These problems were accentuated by the fear of crop failures and poor agricultural out-puts. To counter these challenges she adopted a method very similar to Nehru when Nehru had conflict with the Organizational wing of the Congress party. Similarly as Nehru sidelined Patel by claiming the supremacy of the governmental wing over the organizational wing, Indira Gandhi adopted a similar method.¹¹ As because she was cornered within the party and

⁸PupulJayakar: pp 177

⁹ Granville Austin: working a Democratic constitution, A history of the Indian experience. OUP, 2008

¹⁰SudiptaKaviraj: Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics, EPW, Vol. 21, No.38/39, September 1986. pp 1697

¹¹ Ibid, pp 1699

more importantly as Congress faced a big blow in several States during the 1967 she decided to act on her own. The 1967 general elections cut the Congress's majority in the Lok Sabha to twenty-five, lost its 264 seats in state assemblies and its majorities in eight states.¹² The 1967 election results were the clearest indication of the fact that the long love affair between the Congress and the Indian electorate was coming to an end.¹³ They represented a severe setback for the party. The Congress was still the largest party in the Lok Sabha, but its strength was reduced from 361 to 283 out of a total of 520 seats.

She turned the consequences of Congress defeat into a condition for her own personal success. These events gave the prime minister the justification for challenging the senior figures in the organizational wing of the party who were critical of her leadership and still intent on controlling her. Congress defeat in the states, and the depleted majority at the centre imposed a coalitional logic on her and the Congress. Indeed it intensified this logic to its limit point, which prepared the ground for its decisive transformation. To counter the defeat, she invoked the technique of wider, national coalition. In trying to fight her internal opposition she inclined towards a strategy of a wider coalition of the near left. In this, fortuitously, the group known as the CSF (Congress Socialist Forum) played a crucial role, enabling her to build a bridge across a long-standing history of suspicion. The position of the C.F.S.A was especially strengthened after the 1967 general election with the entry into the CPP of several former members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Praja Socialist Party. The group became increasingly vocal, demanding the implementation of the ten-point programme adopted by the Congress after its 1967 election debacle as a mechanism for reviving the party's image. The program included abolition of privy purses, social control of banks, and nationalization of general insurance. Mrs. Gandhi encouraged the members of the C.F.S.A to attack the more conservative leaders of the Syndicate in her battle for control of the Congress.¹⁴ She also made the younger social-activist Congressmen her vanguard against the 'Old guards' of the Congress party. She intensified the battle over 'Democratic Socialism', between 'the Right and the Left'. On the so-called 'Right' were party president S. Nijalingappa, other members of the syndicate and Morarji Desai. To the left were the 'Young Turks' led by C. Subramaniam. Mrs. Gandhi's consolidation of power resulted in the creation of a pyramidal decision-making structure in the party and government in which all key institutional positions were staffed by loyal and trusted followers. Although the decision-making structure prevented threats to her personal power, it tended to centralize decision making, weaken institutionalization, and create an overly personalized regime. Moreover, the new political process proved unable to manage the tensions and cleavages of a heterogeneous party operating in a heterogeneous society.¹⁵

As a result, one finds an increasing interruption between two levels of politics which could be called its 'surface' and 'deep structures'.¹⁶ On the surface, after the decline of opposition coalitions Congress ministries came to power in most states where it lost its position in the 1967 elections, but at the bottom political instability and its effects did not go away, but only changed form. Instead of a highly visible instability in which unstable and constantly fissile coalitions of opposition groups came and went out of power, there was an endless turnover of ministries within the seeming continuity of Congress rule. At a deeper level, there was an even more fundamental reversal. As a political instrument the party became redundant, illustrated by the fact that even the subtlest of political negotiations were handed over to officials rather than party men. Electorally, of course, Congress did not win the elections for Indira Gandhi, she won them for Congress.

At the working committee meeting which met in Bangalore on 9 July she did not come but sent Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to deliver her note to the meeting. This she described as 'just some stray thoughts rather hurriedly dictated' aimed at setting to rest 'doubts...with regard to our intentions and our willingness to take hard and difficult steps'. The note's ten points included advocating 'nationalized financial institutions', 'more autonomy for public sector projects, appointment of a Monopolies Commission composed of persons of integrity and banning big business from consumer industries'.

The working committee accepted her proposal. By adopting a resolution – drafted by Home Minister Y.B Chavan and moved by finance minister Morarji Desai – consenting to her proposal prevented the transformation of her struggle with party leaders from power to principle. Indira Gandhi knew that to secure her position in the party she had to get rid of Morarji Desai, her principle opponent, as a finance minister. Desai received the letter relieving him of his portfolio as the Finance Minister – a post which Mrs. Gandhi assumed immediately on 16th July 1969. Desai resigned as Deputy Prime minister on 19th July after calling upon Mrs Gandhi a day before. In his resignation speech, Desai told members of the Lok Sabha that he has resigned so as not to become silent spectator to methods that may endanger the basic principles of Democracy on which our parliamentary system is established.

She announced the nationalization of fourteen major commercial banks, at once justifying her earlier action and pushing the Desai controversy into the background. The purpose of nationalization, she announced, was to provide more equitable access to bank credit, particularly for small farmers and artisans. Chavan, Kamaraj, and Atulya Ghosh, previous advocates of bank nationalization when Mrs. Gandhi seemed uninterested welcomed the decision. The banks, holding some 70% of the country's total bank assets, were largely in the hands of a few dominant business families, the Birlas, Tatas, Dalmias, and Jains. Nationalization involved the expenditure of little political capital and reaped widespread support for the Prime Minister. She declared the action as "only the beginning of a bitter struggle between the common people and the vested interests in the country."¹⁷

¹² Tariq Ali: *The Nehru's and the Gandhi's, an Indian dynasty*, picador, 1985.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp 161.

¹⁴ Henry C. Hart: *Indira Gandhi's India: A political system reappraised* (ed), Boulder co. Westview press, 1976, pp. 103

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 105.

¹⁶ Sudipta Kaviraj: *Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics*, EPW, Vol. 21, No.38/39, September 1986. pp. 1701

¹⁷ Robert L. Hardgrave: *The Congress in India- Crisis and Split*, Asian Survey, Vol.10, No.3, March 1970, pp 258

Immediately after these events, with the death of then President Zakir Hussain in May 1969, the office of the President became vacant. The A.I.C.C projected Sanjiva Reddy as their candidate. But Indira Gandhi with her supporters within the party supported V.V Giri. The working committee requested her to issue a public notice in his favor but Indira Gandhi instead appealed for a 'free vote' determined by the conscience of individual MPs.¹⁸ The syndicate approached the Jan Sangh and Swatantra to support Reddy against the candidate backed by the two Communist Parties. Mrs. Gandhi, realizing that the central issue was her political survival; she denounced the Congress leaders who had approached the right, arguing that this had breached the principle of Secularism enshrined in the constitution. On the day before election, she made her position clear in public: 'Vote according to conscience'. Behind the scenes she build support for Giri and on 20th August her strategy paid off; Giri was elected President of India. Giri's election was greeted with tremendous popular enthusiasm because of the support he appealed from outside the party as well. In the wake of Reddy's defeat, the Syndicate was in disarray. It had been embarrassed and was determined to bring disciplinary action against the Prime Minister.

On 12th November, the Working Committee under Nijalingappa removed Mrs. Gandhi from primary membership in the Congress and from leadership of the Congress Parliamentary party. The prime Ministers faction responded with statement saying that her removal from primary party membership was illegal, that the democratically elected parliamentary party elected its own leader. Eighty four years after its birth, the Congress was split. Several days later, Mrs. Gandhi's faction in Parliament -210 in the Lok Sabha and 104 in the Rajya Sabha – confirmed her leadership. But short of majority in both houses, she was to lead the country's first minority government, dependent upon the support of CPI, DMK and a few independents.

3. The First Congress Split

The Congress split was institutionalized in December 1969 with two separate Congress sessions. After the split in the Congress, C.F.S.A members succeeded in getting elected to the executive committee of the CPP and attempted to use the CPP executive as a mechanism to build up pressure for the implementation of a radical policy by the central and state leadership. In fact from 1969-1972, the C.F.S.A members who had little real support in the party organization, were able to use the CPP executive committee to influence the party leadership.¹⁹ The old Congress under Nijalingappa, meeting at Ahmedabad, engaged largely in a ritual of attack and self-justification. The Indira group challenged their claim to a majority of the members and questioned the credentials of many delegates. Jagjivan Ram, became the new Congress President, succeeding C. Subramaniam, who had served as Acting President during the previous weeks. The Prime Minister however now operated from a position of greatly enhanced strength both as leader of her party and, for the time at least, of the nation.²⁰

The idea of Bank Nationalization which became so popular in the Indira era, were not without historical preceding. The idea was floated even during the Nehru era, but it did not substantiate then. Even during Indira Gandhi's period the idea was opposed from several angles. For example, the following day of Bank nationalization, a shareholder in one of the nationalized banks, Rustom Cowasji Cooper, plus Minoo Masani, Balraj Madhok of the Jana Sangh, and others filed petitions in the Supreme Court challenging the President's competence to promulgate the ordinance and claiming violation of their rights under Articles 14, 19 and 31. The chief petitioner, Cooper, claimed violation of his fundamental rights: his right to equality before the law under Article 14 had been infringed because the nationalization of only certain banks was a denial of equality; his right to acquire, hold and dispose of property under Article 19 (1) (f) was violated by taking over of the banks; the taking over of the banks by the state prevented them from engaging in non-banking business; and his right to property under Article 31 and to compensation for property taken had been violated because the compensation was inadequate.²¹ A whole debate over the supremacy of legislature and independence of judiciary came up. The whole issue of constitutional amendment came up. The legislature overpowered by the judiciary many a time which was justified by people like Justice Ray who stated that, "The legislature is the best judge of what is good for the community, by whose suffrage it comes into existence". In other words it is a matter of 'legislative judgment'.

In the mean time it became more and more important for Indira Gandhi to stick to her socialist rhetoric, in spite of repeated failures to fulfill the promises that she gave. On the one hand, she had to stand against the Old Congress' accusations of political opportunism on the other she had to maintain her personal credibility as a committed socialist to neutralize her potent rivals on the extreme left. One danger of resorting to such populist rhetoric according to Francine Frankel is that after a point it is not possible to carry on such radical policies within the constitutional framework but that it will come as a challenge to both national leadership and the democratic political system.²²

Soon after the split differences arose between the national leadership and the socialists inside Congress on the approval of radical policy goals and methods. The two key issues that revealed major differences in approach were those relating to nationalization of private business enterprises, and the future of constitutional provisions establishing the right to property as a fundamental right.

Government policy during this period while "radical" when measured against older policies, were falling short of the Forum's program. The most prominent difference between the Congress leadership and the CFSA surfaced in respect to the key issue of constitutional change raised by obstacles to reform in existing provisions that protected the right to property as a fundamental right. The amendments 24th and 25th were made during this period to override the right to property as a fundamental right. These events led to some sort of confrontation between the Supreme Court and parliament over the legislative powers to amend

¹⁸ Tariq Ali: The Nehru's and the Gandhi's, An Indian Dynasty, Picador, 1984 pp 166

¹⁹ Henry C. Hart: Indira Gandhi's India: A political system reappraised (ed), Boulder co. Westview press, 1976, pp. 103

²⁰ Robert L. Hardgrave: The Congress in India- Crisis and Split, Asian Survey, Vol.10, No.3, March 1970, pp. 260

²¹ Granville Austin: Working a Democratic constitution, A History of the Indian Experience, OUP, pp 216

²² Francine Frankel: India's Political Economy, 1947-1977, The gradual Revolution, OUP, 1978, pp 435

fundamental rights as the condition for even moderate social reforms. Constitutional constraints and the limitations of weak party organization meant that radical economic reforms could not be implemented.

At the time of the 1972 general elections to the state legislative assemblies, organizational degeneration and moral decay were so far advanced that the realistic possibilities of party reform had almost diminished.

This time Mrs. Gandhi elaborated the pledges of Garibi Hatao, according to the election manifesto, the Congress Party, recognized that the "mere passing of legislation is not enough" pledged to "lend its organizational support to the Government in carrying out reforms at the grass-roots level." The result of the election was another massive victory for the Congress party.

But the national leadership's inability to carry out radical social change through peaceful and parliamentary means led India into an economic and political impasse that prevented progress towards goals of growth and social justice. On the contrary, the attempt to achieve both economic development and reduction of disparities in the absence of basic institutional changes led, inevitably, to the pursuit of contradictory policies that resulted in the worst of both, achieving neither growth nor redistribution. The unsatisfactory performance of agriculture provided the most important factor contributing both to the stagnation of national income as well as to the inflationary pressures of the economy.

By June 1973, D.P Dhar had to admit that the abnormal rise in prices and shortages of food grains and other materials had made some reduction in financial outlays inevitable. The fifth plan, scheduled to begin on April 1st, 1974 could not be implemented. In April 1975, the planners publicly conceded that the Draft Fifth Plan, including the program for minimum needs, had become obsolete because of the sharp rise in domestic prices and the increase in international prices of crude oil.

The Central government was once again confronting pressures from the International Monetary Fund to carry out a "stabilization" program that would bring inflation under control as the condition of a credit line to cover the enormous balance of payments deficit. During the years following the prime minister's landslide election victories, the credibility of her leadership and that of the Congress party rapidly declined.

4. Declaration of Emergency

On June 26, 1975, the Government of India under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi proclaimed a state of emergency throughout the country to counter an alleged conspiracy aimed at violently overthrowing the legal Government. Thousands of opponents of Mrs. Gandhi's regime were arrested under specially enacted preventive detention laws that left them with no legal recourse to freedom; fundamental rights and liberties of all were suspended; and even the legality of the emergency measures was decreed to be no longer subject to judicial review. Mrs. Gandhi's constant refrain in justifying the Emergency was that democracy had gone off the rails, and a shock treatment of enforced discipline was necessary to put it back.²³ Which Indira Gandhi later justifies in a meeting by stating that mothers sometimes have to make their children swallow a bitter pill so that the child recover from his/her illness.

If Indira Gandhi had thought she could win the 1976 elections there would not have been an Emergency. Its purpose was basically twofold: to safeguard the Congress Party and her own political position while forcibly bringing to an end rural and urban unrest in many parts of the country.²⁴

This period of Emergency saw Sanjay Gandhi's rise to power. The increase in the authority of Sanjay was one of the most alarming sides of the emergency. Sanjay's authority derived from one fact alone: he was the son of the PM of India. The Government controlled media had, during the emergency boosted his personality cult. This attempt to project Sanjay Gandhi as her successor created a generalized feeling of disgust in the country. The two measures introduced by him which arose cumulative anger among the people were: a forced sterilization campaign and the brutal uprooting of slum-dwellers from the major cities of India.²⁵

The year 1975 began in an atmosphere of tension, of which the assassinations of the Railways Minister, L. N. Mishra, and of the Inspector- General of Police, Mizoram, were symptoms. The tension was a legacy of events from the preceding year: the forced dissolution of the Gujarat legislature by a "people's movement" with strong student participation, aiming at ending corruption and opportunism in the state; the spread of the movement to Bihar under the direct leadership of its charismatic leader, Jaya Prakash Narayan ("J.P."), the sole surviving giant of pre-independence India; a seemingly never-ending scandal about import licensing centred around L. N. Mishra, of which the Opposition in Parliament had already made much political capital; a ruthless suppression of the railways workers' strike, using tactics of imprisonment, intimidation, and repression; continued factionalism within the Congress Party in many states, most notably in Bihar and U.P.; runaway inflation and ever-growing numbers falling below the poverty line; and increasing restlessness and violence manifested in strikes and demonstrations. In the process, Mrs. Gandhi's popular image as a champion of the poor had slipped from its peak of 1971-72.²⁶

Early in 1975, Mrs. Gandhi's most formidable political threat was posed by the "J.P. movement" in Bihar, which threatened to spread and engulf most of northern India.²⁷ The movement was possibly the most significant political development of independent India. Nevertheless, at no point had it succeeded in transforming its spontaneous beginnings in Bihar into a coherent political force. J.P.'s importance lay not so much in constituting an electoral challenge to Mrs. Gandhi as in being a symbol of popular dissatisfaction with three decades of Congress misrule, corruption and ineptitude. His attacks upon Congress were two-pronged:

²³ W.H Morris Jones: Whose Emergency India's or Indira's?, The world Today, Vol.31, No.11, Nov. 1975

²⁴ Tariq Ali :The Nehrus and the Gandhis: an Indian Dynasty, 1985, published by Picador.pp 187.

²⁵ Tariq Ali :The Nehrus and the Gandhis: an Indian Dynasty, 1985, published by Picador.pp 190.

²⁶ Ramesh C. Thakur: the fate of India's Parliamentary Democracy, Pacific Affairs, Vol.49, No.2, Summer 1976. pp 3

²⁷ John R. Wood: Extra-parliamentary Opposition in India: An analysis of populist agitations in Gujarat and Bihar, Pacific Affairs, Vol.48, No.3, Autumn 1975

he denounced the pervasiveness of corruption at all levels of Indian political and administrative life; and he decried the increasing tendencies toward authoritarian and arbitrary rule.

A pro-Narayan section emerged among the noncommunist socialists in the Congress parliamentary party. They not only defended "J.P.'s" patriotic motives, but argued in favor of a dialogue between the prime minister and the Sarvodaya leader to bridge the growing gulf between the government and opposition parties, and prevent the "sinister attempts and machinations" of the pro-CPI elements to create another split in the Congress party as the overture to establishing an "alternate" government of left and democratic unity.

During the next few weeks, Mrs. Gandhi suffered a series of setbacks that could not have been anticipated either by her or her allies. On the morning of June 12, 1975, after a four year litigation challenging the legality of her 1971 election- in a court case considered to present no more than a minor political embarrassment for the prime minister- justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court ruled that Mrs. Gandhi had committed "corrupt practices" under the Representation of People Act (1951) in her campaign for the Lok Sabha from Rae Bareilly constituency in Uttar Pradesh. Justice Sinha found the Prime Minister guilty of two charges. He ruled that she had authorized Yashpal Kapoor, her personal secretary, to carry out election work on her behalf in Rae Bareilly, before his resignation from government service to act as her election agent could become more effective. He also found Mrs. Gandhi guilty of using the services of local officials to construct rostrums and provide loudspeakers and power arrangements which added to the effectiveness of her campaign but could not be justified strictly in terms of security arrangements essential to the protection of the prime minister.²⁸

The conviction on "corrupt practices" even in the case of such minor offenses, automatically invalidated Mrs. Gandhi's 1971 election from Rae Bareilly. Under India's electoral law, it also debarred Mrs. Gandhi from holding any elective office during the next six years.

On 26th June the President of India declared an emergency because of turmoil and incipient rebellion in the country. There had been mass arrests of opposition leaders and others in New Delhi and in many states. A government-ordered electricity cut off prevented Delhi's newspapers from publishing the news; a Home Ministry 'order' imposed censorship before noon on the 26th. The constitution's Fundamental Rights were suspended, public gatherings and meetings of more than five persons banned, and preventive detention provisions made more stringent. A few days later, the Prime Minister announced the Twenty-point Programme of socio- economic reforms.²⁹

Because conditions were unsettled, many citizens welcomed the Emergency several months after it was declared. Calm was restored, bureaucrats became more responsive, food prices came down for a time. But the period was witnessing an example of the ease with which a ruthless government can subdue a democratic, but frightened, people.³⁰

Although the Emergency, in the extensiveness of its evils, was an aberration in the history of Indian Democracy, it also was the 'culmination of long tendencies'. Centralization came into full sway with Indira Gandhi's arrogation of power within government. By 26th June 1975, power had shifted from Parliament through the ministry and the cabinet to the prime Minister and it would then go to a coterie of individuals without constitutional office- led by her son, Sanjay.

Marginalizing the opposition, not letting it speak effectively had unfortunate consequences for constitutional politics as a whole. For this meant that grievances and dissent, deprived of channels of legitimate articulation and hearing, would erupt more violently; and increasingly on a larger number of issues, the space for discursive politics would be given up, and government and dissenting groups would face each other more violently.³¹ Ironically, however, the destruction of the opposition also destroyed the justification for the Emergency. In course of time both arguments, that is, of threat to unity and integrity of the country and secondly and perhaps more popular rationalization of the Emergency was that it was meant also to negotiate the inflationary situation, faded into insignificance. Though Emergency itself could be seen as a degeneration of ordinary democratic government, midway through it, it turned into a degeneration of this degeneration.

Presenting the graveness of the situation, Pupul Jayakar states in her biography of Indira Gandhi: During the Emergency the ear of the government closed to people's complaints; this had inevitably led to the closing of the ear of the people to government appeals. It was not the enormity or the savagery of what happened during the Emergency but the terror it invoked and the insecurity it generated that drove a wedge between the ruler and the ruled.

According to Iqbal Narain, there are several reasons as to why Indira Gandhi might have given the call for elections. First, the election had to be held at that moment only because there was a sheer chance of price rise at that moment because of stagnancy of food grains production as well as a bad monsoon and she did not want to lose the chance to capitalize on the "gains of Emergency".

Second, the tensions between the Youth Congress and the parent Congress on the one hand and intra-party contradictions within the Congress on the other were on the increase- reaching almost an eruption point after the Gauhati session. Timely elections would help contain them. Mrs. Gandhi would perhaps succeed in purging the dissident stalwarts or cut them down to size with the help of the Youth Congress. Third, she had to legitimize her Emergency in the eyes of the international community by holding the elections. Finally, she could never believe that the opposition political parties, in view of the short time at their disposal, would form a single party, cooperate effectively, and evoke a martyr's response from the people.

Rudolphs suggested the following reasons for the holding of elections. First, Indira Gandhi was extraordinarily sensitive to charges at home and abroad that in placing India under emergency rule she had betrayed democracy, the legacy left by Mahatma

²⁸ Francine Frankel: India's Political Economy, 1947-1977, the Gradual Revolution, OUP, pp. 540

²⁹ Granville Austin: working a Democratic constitution, A history of the Indian experience. OUP, 2008, pp 295.

³⁰ Ibid, pp 297.

³¹ SudiptaKaviraj: Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics, EPW, Vol. 21, No.38/39, September 1986. pp 9

Gandhi and her father, Jawaharlal Nehru. The suppression of dissent particularly through the suppression of the Indian press and detention of political opponents and the promulgation of a body of laws (MISA) legitimizing authoritarian rule gave her critics sufficient grounds for their case against her. She called for an election in part to give the lie to such allegations, to maintain the credibility of her claim to rule constitutionally and legally as well as democratically. She had taken care to maintain the form if not the spirit of the constitution, a tactic that had the great virtue of legitimizing her authority with the army, the police, and the civil service.³²

5. Conclusion

The party structure in India has been a single-party dominant system for most part of post-colonial history in India. It has been the Congress party that has represented this system for a long time in history, with the Nehru-Gandhi family being the dynasty that has been crucial in shaping the party. But over the years, one can see the decadence of institutional mechanisms due to dependence on a family for survival of the Party. This points towards a major weakness in Indian party structures. That is, lack of institutional accountability and design inside the party which leads to the increased dependence on a single-family. After the sixteenth general elections, with the thumping mandate of absolute majority to a single party underlines the importance of revitalizing the institutional mechanisms because today the profile of Indian electorate is changing considerably and are no more in the hangover of independence struggle. Therefore, if the Congress party wants to survive, it has to revive its institutional mechanism and party structure considerably.

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