

Resurgence of Indian National Congress Party (INC) In General Elections 2004



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Abstract

India is the largest democratic country at the world level. The very basis of Indian democracy is enshrined in preamble to the Indian Constitution. India's democratic set up is comprised of around 700 million voters. It has 543 constituencies at Lower House level, popularly known as 'LOK SABHA' in India. Every five years, General elections are held in India. It has been a leading and role model country so far conduct of free and fair elections by the Election Commission of India is concerned. All eligible voters above the age of 18 elect their representatives and the party securing majority within Lower House forms the government at the centre. For past several years, there have been six national political parties in India besides host of State parties also known as regional parties. Examples of national parties are: Indian National Congress, BJP, CPI, CPM, NCP, and BSP etc. Examples of state /regional parties are like BSP, Akali DAI, DMK, AIADMK, TDP, NC, PDP, RJD, JD(U), SP and so forth. Indian National Congress is the oldest political party since its inception in 1885. It has been dominating Indian politics since pre-independence period. In post independence period, it ruled the country at centre level from 1947 to 1977; 1980 to 1989; and then 1991-92 to 1995-96 at the centre level. It had been ruling in several states also except Kerela, West Bengal and Tripura where Communist parties could replace Congress party from power. However, at the end of 20th century and in beginning of 21st century the demographic profile of country has changed, literacy rate in India has improved considerably and as a result many political parties especially Congress (I) have lost their blind dominance on people. Because of the proliferation of 24 hours news TV channels and social media, voters awareness has increased. Voters prefer to vote for a party who actually work for the welfare of the people and development of the country. Any cases of mis-governance, corruption, nepotism is likely to woo voters not to vote for such parties either in state legislature assemblies or Lok Sabha. On the contrary, if parties have worked for the people and for their state, then people have rewarded political parties to form government three times continuously, as in case of Delhi government led by Congress leader Shiela Dixit as CM of the state. In case of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu remained CM for four consecutive terms. However, since late 1980s, and mid 1990s, country has witnessed formation of the coalition government at centre as well as state level both, with the largest number of Congress (I) which has governed the country for longest period of time. Looking at the history of Congress (I) party, it had to suffer many ups and downs especially in 1977, when PM Indira Gandhi imposed national emergency in the country which led to bringing a bad name for the country and their leader Indira Gandhi for next several years.

Keywords: Governance, General Elections. UPA Govt., NDA Govt., UF Govt., Secularism.

Introduction

Democracies can not be sustained with the effective role played by the political parties in any part of the world. The political parties are indispensable for the working of democratic government. They play an important role in interest articulation and interest aggregation and thus enable the people to take part in the government's decision making. Political parties are also very important agency of political socialization. The party system acts as a catalyst for the growth and stability of a democratic polity. Its development, particularly since the late 19th century, has been the subject matter for political analysts and political theorists.¹ Maciver defines political party as "an association organized in support of some principles or policy which by constitutional means it endeavours to

make the determinant of government."² Gilchrist says, "Political party is an organized group of citizens who profess to share the same political views and who by acting as a political unit try to control the government. The chief aim of the party is to make its own opinions and policy prevails."³ In fact, the working of any system of representative government is in large measure determined by the nature of the political parties, which operates it. There are other scholars like C Wright Mills, Mosca and Pareto who talked about 'Iron law of Oligarchy' and political parties always being governed by elites of the country.

All democratic nations of the world have strong presence of political parties in their part of the world. It is impossible to visualize a healthy polity in a modern society without an effective political party system. Almost all-modern societies, democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian, developed or developing,, large or small, has presence of one or the other type of party system. In view of the introduction of parliamentary system of government and promulgation of the principal of 'Universal Adult Franchise', the political parties have come to occupy an important position in the Indian Political System. The history of the origin of the Congress party goes back to the year 1885 when the Grand Old Party i.e., the Indian National Congress was founded. Though numerous political groups existed prior to that date which served as a forum for discussion and debate on various political and public issues but they were largely sectional in character. The first national forum, which concentrated on various political and public issues at the National level, was Indian National congress. Indian National Congress is the oldest political organization which has ruled Indian politics for more than sixty years. In post independence period, it ruled the country at centre level from 1947 to 1977; 1980 to 1989; and then 1991-92 to 1995-96 at the centre level. It had been ruling in several states also except Kerela, West Bengal and Tripura where Communist parties could replace Congress party from power. As illiteracy has been almost decimated, all the parties especially Congress (I) have lost their blind dominance on people. At present, those parties survive who actually work for the amelioration of the people. It is the right or wrong governance which woos the people to vote either in state legislature assemblies or Lok Sabha. In the centre, it is the coalition govt. with the largest number of Congress (I) which is governing the country. However, at the end of 20th century and in beginning of 21st century the demographic profile of country has changed, literacy rate in India has improved considerably and as a result many political parties especially Congress (I) have lost their blind dominance on people. Because of the proliferation of 24 hours news TV channels and social media, voters awareness has increased. Voters prefer to vote for a party who actually work for the welfare of the people and development of the country. Any cases of mis-governance, corruption, nepotism is likely to woo voters not to vote for such parties either in state legislature assemblies or Lok Sabha. On the contrary, if parties worked for the people and for their

states, then people have rewarded political parties to form government three times continuously, as was in case of Delhi government led by Congress leader Shiela Dixit as CM of the state. In case of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu remained CM for four consecutive terms. However, since late 1980s, and mid 1990s, country has witnessed formation of the coalition government at centre as well as state level both, with the largest number of Congress (I) which has governed the country for longest period of time. Looking at the history of Congress (I) party, it had to suffer many ups and downs especially in 1977, when PM Indira Gandhi imposed national emergency in the country which led to bringing a bad name for the country and their leader Indira Gandhi for next several years.

Though, Congress party did manage to capture power under Rajiv Gandhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. However, Rajiv Gandhi led government could not win comfortable majority in 1989 General Election on charges of Bofors scandal and VP Singh formed a coalition government in India in 1989. Since then formation of coalition government in India has become the normal pattern of politics. It was PM P.V Narsimha Rao who tried his best to improve the internal as well as external prospects of the party. It was PM Rao's government which started the much needed economic reforms process in the country. Even this did not help Congress party to win elections in 1995-96. BJP formed its government for only thirteen days and another coalition government under PM H D Devegowda got formed till a political crisis developed and Congress party withdrew its support from H.D Devegowda led UF govt. Again, in 1997, Congress (I) suffered a setback due to defeat of the party in 12th Lok Sabha elections in March 1998 in which Congress party could get only 141 seats with 25.82% votes.

Objective of the paper

The objective of the paper is to analyze the decline and resurgence and performance of Congress (I) led UPA-I government during the 14th general elections. The paper highlights the major issues raised by Congress (I) in 2004 polls which resulted into their victory. Finally, the paper also analyses various factors that resulted into second consecutive win on part of moribund Congress party in 2009 General Elections under Smt. Sonia Gandhi as president of the party and Manmohan Singh as PM of the country.

Methodology

The methodology for the study is primarily based on content analysis. The data has been collected from both primary as well as secondary sources. The subject has been treated in a chronological order. A number of books, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha debates, research journals, magazines, news papers have been used. Information from web sources also have been used for completion of paper.

In the 13th Lok Sabha elections Congress (I) could secure only 109 seats for which were held in September 1999. The Congress emerged as the

second largest party and it got recognition as the official opposition with Sonia Gandhi as the leader of the opposition in the 13th Lok Sabha. The 14th Lok Sabha election was held in April- May 2004 when the Thirteenth Lok Sabha was dissolved. The 13th Lok Sabha was dissolved on the advice of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, almost eight months before the expiry of its term and when the government was fully in command of a very comfortable majority. BJP government was over confident about its victory but the election results were accepted as a clear mandate for the BJP and NDA to sit in opposition. The Congress party's resurgent in May 2004. Though it was the second largest party after the BJP (182), it got the status of an opposition party at the centre. But with the emergence of Sonia Gandhi as president of the Congress party again, she managed to revamp and restructure the rank and file of the party and she steered her party to form a government under PM Manmohan Singh in May 2004.

Following the 2004 elections the Congress party again managed to acquire the status of the ruling party. In these elections Congress party emerged as the largest party at the centre after a gap of eight years. The general elections proved that days of one party dominance are over and in future, the national politics would be the sum total of state politics. The polls seem to have shown India to be a far more federal nation than before. Many scholars have been making forecasts that era of coalition government shall stay in India for a longer period of time. In the Lok Sabha elections of 2004, the Indian National Congress led by their leader Sonia Gandhi won a victory over the Bhartiya Janata Party of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Shortly thereafter Sonia Gandhi was nominated by the 19 Congress allies to be the next Prime Minister of India. But Sonia Gandhi gauging the mood of nation on issue of her foreign origin refused to become PM of the country instead she chose eminent economist, former Union Finance Minister and senior Congress leader Manmohan Singh for the post of Prime Minister. The swearing in ceremony took place on 22nd May, 2004. Thus the general elections of 2004 had greater importance for Congress party because UPA Government won the elections and Manmohan Singh, as the new Prime

Minister marked the end of Vajpayee era in turn BJP era.

Conduct of General Elections in 2004

In the name of conducting free and fair elections in the country, the Lok Sabha elections were conducted in five phases by the Election Commission of India. The elections were held in five phases on April 20, April 22, April 26, May 5, and May 10. In the first phase, on April 20, polling was held in 13 states and two Union Territories, namely Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu. On April 26, 11 states witnessed elections. On May 5, seven states went to the hustings. On May 10, the National Capital Territory of Delhi witnessed elections. This was the first time in India that electronic machines were used in all the Parliamentary and Assembly constituencies.⁴ J & K had four - day polling, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, it was a three-day event. It was over in two days in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur and Orissa. The remaining states and all the Union Territories had single- day polling.

The Core Issues during Election Campaign

Campaign began with the systematic creation of 'India Shinning' and 'Feel Good' mood and ended with the ruling coalition feeling discomfort feeling of rejection. As far as Campaign media was concerned, the personality cult was very much there; huge hoardings of leaders, banners were profuse. Processions and cycle rallies with loud speakers were very much part of the campaign. Rath of top leaders with thousands of people lining the route to have a glimpse of them and huge mass meetings whipped up the feelings of people. Everything was aimed at impressing, arousing emotions. No attempt to convince the people. They were asked practically to give blank cheques. The Election Commission within the framework of available rules could not prevent this lavish, showy and volatile kind of campaigning.⁵

Results of General Elections 2004

There are a maximum of 543 members of Parliament: 541 elected, and two may be nominated by the president to represent the Anglo-Indian community. Repolling was ordered in four constituencies due to irregularities. The final results and party position in elections are as follows.

Table: Final Tally of Political Parties during 2004 Elections

Congress & Allies		BJP & Allies		Left Parties		Other	
Congress	145	BJP	138	CPI (M) Communist Party of India	43	SP (Samajwadi Party)	36
RJD	24	Shiv Sena	12	CPI	10	BSP	19
DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhgam)	16	BJD (Biju Janata Dal)	11	AIFB (All India Forward Block)	3	Janata Dal (S)	4
NCP (National Congress Party)	9	SAD (Shiromani Akali Dal)	8	RSP (Revolutionary Socialist Party)	3	NC (National Conference)	2
PMK (Pattali Makkal Katchi)	6	JD (U) (Janta Dal (U))	8	KC (J) (Kerala Congress (Joseph))	1	RLD (Rashtriya Lok Dal)	3
TRS (Telangana Rashtra Samiti)	5	TDP (Telugu Deshan Party)	5			AGP	2
JMM (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha)	5	NTC (National Trinamool Congress)	2			BNP	1
MDMK	4	NPF (Nagaland)	1			LJSP	1

(Marumalarchi DMK)		People's Front)					
LJP (Lok Janashakti Party)	3	IFDP (Indian Federal Democratic Party)	1			MEIM	1
PDP (J&K People's Democratic Party)	1					NLP	1
RPI (A) Republican Party of India	1					SDF	1
						SJP (R)	1
						Independents	4
Total	219	Total	186	Total	60	Total	76

Source: The Hindu, May 4, 2004.

The NDA Government: Reasons of Losing 2004 Lok Sabha Elections

The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) lost the elections because as per many, it had not paid sufficient attention to the needs of rural Indians. The former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, admitted the riots in Gujarat and that could be the reason for the defeat of his NDA coalition in the recent Lok Sabha elections. Vajpayee told journalists at Bhuntar airport before going to his Prini village home at Manali in Kullu district that perhaps the communal riots in Gujarat was one of the reasons for NDA not being voted back to power. "One impact of the violence was we lost the elections." Speaking media persons in Manali, he also fixed "maximum responsibility" for BJP's defeat in the recent general elections and offered to do "penance". He said "I am most to blame for the defeat because the elections were fought on my name."⁶

According to the BJP, the major factors that led to its downfall were over-confidence; lack of popularity which cost 50 percent of sitting MP's their seats-the verdict being an aggregate of local factors and the party's allies, who pulled the BJP down with their own conflicts. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was fairly scathing in analyzing the reasons for BJP's defeat in the April - May general elections. He said that the party was over-confident about its victory and felt it was unfair if someone did not vote for them.⁷

The Reasons for the Resurgence of the Congress (I) Party

Verdict 2004, represented a total rejection of whatever the Bhartiya Janata party stood for Party success in carrying forward the spirit of the verdict will depend on the policies and political practices of the Congress, which heads the new government. This verdict contained unambiguous political messages. It rejected the Atal Bihari Vajpayee led NDA government by reducing the alliance to a minority in the Lok Sabha. It also dismissed firmly the government's claims - symbolized by the India Shining Campaign- about the growth and development of the country achieved under it and disapproved of the politics of Hindutva practiced by the Bhartiya Janata Party.⁸ Vajpayee said that the communal riots in Gujarat were one of the reasons for NDA not being voted back to power and UPA government's victory in elections. The most important

and central place in election campaign should have been occupied by debates about policies followed by the coming government especially about such important matters as roti, rozi and makaan as well as about health, education etc. By and large, the BJP and NDA avoided this. They only concerned about that smaller part of India, which is shining. For the BJP, leaders only the upper middle classes and those above them really matter and not hundreds of crore below the poverty line.⁹

Slogans of 'Development and Good Governance' in general too did not yield the expected results because the BJP leaders and others of the NDA generally failed to refer to the greater part of India which was not only shining but was and is in gloom because of poverty and growing unemployment. A fantastic claim has been made by the leaders of the BJP and its allies that during its 45 years of rule, the Congress had done nothing while they had done a lot during five-year.¹⁰

The foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi also became the main election issue of the BJP and the BJP-led NDA. But the emergence of Sonia Gandhi-led Congress as the single largest party made it clear that an over whelming mass of people have rejected the campaign against her on the basis of her foreign origins. That also indicated that they do not see her as unfit to hold constitutional office in India.¹¹ In addition to it so, many other factors also helped the Congress (I) party's resurgence in Indian polity after 8 years. The Gandhi family's involvement in the party also helped in its resurgence. Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi did the propaganda for the party. It is true that the candidature of Rajiv - Sonia Gandhi's son, Rahul Gandhi and an active campaigning by their daughter, Priyanka, did lift the morale of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, The Congress relied entirely on the magic of the Gandhi family and brought into the campaign both Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, apart from Sonia herself.

Sonia Gandhi's campaigning style also helped in winning elections. She personally led the Congress campaign with her road shows to focus on the problems of the farmers and the unemployed youth to take the sheen off the BJP's India shining and Feel Good campaign. These two key issues shaped the policies of new Congress - led alliance at the centre. In the last six months, Sonia changed her

style of interactions with the people. She broke through the cordon of the SPG and her advisers to interact with the media and that to in Hindi and reached out to the people through her road shows. As a first step, both Sonia Gandhi and the party went in for an image makeover. The Congress president cast aside her 'Sphinx-like' persona, stepped out of her shell and embarked on an exhaustive 'road-show'. She reached out to the people of the rural hinterland, talking to them not about macro issues but about their local problems.

The message was loud and clear: this was Indira Gandhi as a new Avatar of Sonia Gandhi and this was the old Congress, the party closely identified with the interests of the rural poor and deprived sections. By this Sonia Gandhi revived the old tradition of the Congress party through her Jan Sampark programme; she did not allow security issues to restrict her movements. She had been travelling not in a fancy expensive designer bus, but in ordinary car and like an ordinary person. She met thousands of ordinary citizens. She had eaten and sat with them and listen to their problems. Sonia Gandhi's very warm and real interaction, with the people has minimized the harm of her 'foreign origin', her lack of speaking Hindi. She has used the opportunity provided by her road shows to bring directly to the people the principles, aims and programmes of the Congress party. She has repeatedly stressed the plight of our farmers and how agricultural growth has come to a virtual standstill. She has also pointed out how the Congress party is committed to social welfare programmes for rural India. One of the most remarkable features of Sonia Gandhi's journey through India has been the instant rapport that she has built up with women. Her interaction with rural women has given them hope for a better future and shown them how the Congress party has their interests as one of its major programmes. At the same time, the Congress shed its 'touch-me-not' image. The Congress was quick to grasp this message. The party went back to its pro-poor image as its election campaign went into an over drive to expose this obvious disconnect between India and Bharat. Ultimately, by going to the people she has shown that the Congress is for the people and she becomes a mature politician. The strategy worked and the election results have held out hope for the Congress.¹²

The success of the Congress – led offensive against the BJP has a lot to do with Sonia's decision to recast the party's strategy and forge alliances with secular parties. The spectacular victories in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu only underlined the strength of the alliances she had struck when she reached out of leaders such as Karunanidhi (DMK), Sharad Pawar (NCP), H.S. Surjeet (CPI-M), Ram Vilas Paswan (LJS) and others. On the evening of May 16, the leaders of 19 non-NDA parties gathered at Janpath, the residence of Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi and unanimously asked her to form the new government at the Centre.¹³

Sonia Gandhi Overcomes Leader of the House Problem

On May 18, was happened an emotionally charged clash between irresistible desperation and immovable resolution. Sonia Gandhi hardly moved an inch from her written vow. She would not be the prime minister of India. The refusal by Sonia Gandhi to head the government came as a surprise to everyone. Many had a sigh of relief. Many other were disappointed. Congressmen did not give up so easily. As she turned to 10 Jan Path, her home for 15 year, she was faced with a paper tornado threatening to sweep her resolution away. All CWC members and others office-bearers of the AICC had sent in written resignations. Party workers multiplied outside her residence crying for a change of mind. One of them even threatened to shoot him. It was vintage Congress. They missed the point, though: this Gandhi was of a different genetic construction. And she had her own moment to write history.

It has been the story of Sonia so far. From day one of the battle for the 14th Lok Sabha, she has been the lady of revenge. When she declined to be Prime Minister and refused to be the heroine of another dynastic coronation, Sonia had her personal. She wanted to be a rejoinder to all the personal attacks on her acquired citizenship. So Sonia's decision not to be Prime Minister was not a knee-jerk refusal, but a strategic renunciation that blunts the Sangh Parivar's attack and enhances her stature as a leader.¹⁴ When Sonia Gandhi refused to take the position of Prime Minister based on her inner-voice, eminent economist, former Union Finance Minister and senior Congress Leader Manmohan Singh was backed by her for the post of Prime Minister. The swearing in ceremony took place on 22nd May 2004.¹⁵

Since then, the Congress party and UPA have been ruling the county with Dr. Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister of the country. At present the UPA (II) with the help of TMC and DMK etc. is governing the destiny of the country. These days UPA (II) is under the cloud of many scams like 2G Spectrum, Adarsh Housing Society and Common Wealth Games. Along with corruption issues has been raised regarding black money and about the strongest Jan Lokpal Bill being brought under the leadership of Anna Hazare. These scams have darkened the picture of Congress (I) (UPA II). If India has to survive, if India has to fight against scams and corruption, included black money, she will have to take stern decisions to punish to corrupt leaders. It is true that some of the leaders, owing to corruption, are in Tihar Jail yet more of corrupt leaders are to be scanned and apprehended so that the scenario of the Indian politics get free from corrupt leaders. It is also required that the Congress party must commit to good governance which will help it to control inflation which, at present is hitting hearts on middle and poor class.

Major Findings

The major findings of this paper is that the days of one party dominance are over and in future, the national politics would be the sum total of state politics and good governance. The outcomes of Election seemed to show India is grown as matured

federal polity then before. The outcome of 2004 and 2009 elections established the resurgence of oldest political party of the country i.e., Congress (I) which won general elections with the help of regional parties' alliance. This shows the increasing importance of regional political parties in political landscape of India.

Key Contribution of the Paper

The paper has found that the role of parties for sustaining democracy in India is must. The roots of democracy have got strengthened in India. The party that promises to work for masses has fair chance of winning elections.

Conclusion

The election to the Lok Sabha 2004 was a watershed election. After experiencing two BJP-led governments for six years, the people of India voted out the BJP and gave a mandate to the Congress and its allies. It was a limited mandate, the Congress winning only 145 seats; yet it was an unambiguous mandate to form, together with its allies, a secular, liberal and progressive government that will promote faster and more inclusive growth. If the verdict of 2004 was significant, the verdict at the next elections in 2009 was even more significant. The people of India reduced the representation of the BJP in the Lok Sabha (from 138 to 116) and increased the representation of the Congress (from 145 to 206). The Congress got not only a renewed mandate, but an enlarged mandate to build the country in accordance with its declared vision. In the last 7 years (five years of UPA-I and two years of UPA-II), the Congress has provided good governance. In recent months, the issue of corruption has generated considerable debate. Along with corruption, issues have been raised regarding 'black money'.

Let us make it clear: The Congress party and the governments that it leads at the Centre and the States are committed to good governance. In recent months, the Congress party has taken a number of steps that will clearly manifest its intentions. For example, the Government is engaged in drafting a strong and sound LokPal Bill. It has entrusted grave allegations of corruption that may involve people in high places to investigation by the CBI. It has welcomed the Supreme Court's oversight of the investigations. The Government has ratified the UN Convention against Corruption.

While action on corruption and black money is indeed important, it must not forget that the main objectives of good government are inclusive growth, development, employment and abolition of poverty. There are also other social objectives such as gender equality, sustainable development, preservation of the environment and the eco-system etc. The UPA government, in the last 7 years, has taken historical initiatives to further these objectives and to benefit the

aam aadmi. Among them are the Right to Information Act; Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) ; the Right to Education Act; the universalisation of primary education and anganwadi centres; pensions to the elderly, disabled and widows; Swastha Bima Yojana (health insurance); expansion of scholarships for SC, ST and the minorities; and higher MSP for agricultural products and low-interest farm loans. The path-breaking Right to Food Security Act will be passed shortly.

The nation needs good governance. The Congress party solemnly renews its pledge to serve the aam aadmi. The Congress party has provided good governance both under UPA-I and UPA-II and pledges itself to continue to provide good governance to the people of India. In brief, since independence, the Indian National Congress has undergone many splits and its role today is so different from what it was in the pre-independence era. Not at the time of independence and after independence but at present, it is also a strong party in Indian politics.

Endnotes

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