

## **CHAPTER-2**

### **ERA OF ONE PARTY DOMINANCE**

#### **CONGRESS DOMINANCE: ITS DIFFERENT NATURE**

India like other countries also witnessed domination of one party. But dominance of Congress in India was entirely of a different nature.

In other countries, this dominance came by compromising with democracy. States like China, Cuba and Syria, the constitution permitted only one party. Others like Pakistan, Myanmar, Belarus, Egypt and Eritrea were one-party states due to legal and military measures. Till few years back, even Mexico, South Korea and Taiwan were one party dominant states. However, the dominance of the Congress was different in the sense that it came under democratic conditions. Several parties contested elections in free and fair conditions but Congress managed to win the election decades after decades. Similar domination has been enjoyed only by African National Congress in South Africa after the end of Apartheid.

The dominance of Congress was due to its legacy of colonial struggle, well-knit organisation, and adjustment to circumstances. It made Congress the dominant party in a democratic system as opposed to monopoly of one-parties in other states like China, Cuba, etc.

At state level, Congress had uneven dominance due to existence of so many parties most of which were regional. In Madras, Congress Party could only save its government due to separation of Andhra Pradesh. However, in 1954 CPI government was brought down leading to implementation of President's rule. Fresh elections had to be held after the 1954 assembly elections in Travancore-Cochin, PEPSU and Andhra as Congress could not maintain majority. Later though Congress got absolute majority in PEPSU and it checked Communists in Andhra Pradesh, it failed to win Travancore-Cochin. To retain it and stop Communists, it formed a minority government with Praja Socialist Party (PSP). PSP stayed in power till 1956 when as a result of state reorganisation, a new state Kerala was formed and fresh elections were held in

1957. Linguistic reorganisation of states led to the separation of Telugu-speaking area of Madras as Andhra Pradesh. Likewise, Malabar was separated from Madras. It helped Congress to get majority in these states. However, it failed to do so in Orissa and Kerala. , Thus, while Congress dominated at the national level, its dominance at state was uneven and shaky due to the existence of a large number of political parties.

## **CONGRESS AS A SOCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL COALITION**

The Congress Party was challenged by Muslim League before Independence. After Independence, Muslim League went to Pakistan while a minor base was left in Kerala. Congress, therefore, was the undisputed champion of the political system. By the general election of 1952, it was the pre-dominant party. Its biggest asset was that it drew people from all walks of life. It had Brahmins, leftists, rights, dalits, backward classes, upper-castes, farmers-both rich and poor, industrialists, workers, minorities and adivasis. Along with Nehru it had eminent leaders like Kamaraj and Jagjivan Ram representing OBCs and dalits. Thus, Congress was a coalition of diverse groups. Leftist parties like CPI and rightists like Bhartiya Jan Sangh (B.J.S.), acted better as pressure groups rather than opposition parties. Since Congress nearly represented all people, it was considered to be the best possible alternative.

It was this political engineering which helped Congress to dominate the political system in India from 1952-1967. It led political analysts to call this 'Congress System' or 'Congress Dominance'. So long as the Congress worked as a coalition, incorporating all classes and castes, the Opposition remained dysfunctional. This was the position at the national level. However, at state level some parties were able to challenge the supremacy of Congress. CPI did so in Kerala and West Bengal. But till 1967 Congress was able to hold on to the state assemblies also.

The coalition nurtured by Congress soon started losing ground. The social and economic development made the coalition nature dysfunctional. The OBCs no longer accept Savarna leadership of Congress. People are no longer ready to accept westernised brahminical elite. Agrarian elites also want to reap the

fruits of power. So the political decline of Congress led to political instability which can be traced to this strange process of social change.

Though Congress dominated the first three general elections, the nature of its dominance was quite uneven. At times it even formed coalitions as the 1954 coalition with PSP in Travancore-Cochin to keep CPI out of power. Likewise, in Orissa it formed a coalition government with the Ganatantra Party in 1957 when it failed to get majority. This arrangement continued till 1961 when Congress came back to power through a snap poll. Congress even lost to CPI in Kerala. In 1959, Congress joined hands with all anti-communist forces like PSP, Muslim League to bring down the Communist Government and this coalition came to power in a mid-term poll held in 1960. Later, however, Congress tried to break free from PSP and Muslim League leading to its defeat at the hands of CPI in 1967 elections in Kerala.

The year 1967 proved to be a turning point for Congress. In last elections in over 5 states and defections saw the failure of its government in three states. Political Scientists regard this era as the turning point in the history of 'Congress System' or 'Congress Dominance'. However, it would be wrong to call it as the declining era of Congress. No doubt 1967 turned out to be a turning point in Congress dominance, Congress still was a major political force in the Indian political system.

## **SOCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF CONGRESS**

Congress had emerged as a pressure group of the intellectuals, professionals and commercial classes in the twentieth century. Congress began as a party dominated by English speaking upper caste, upper middle class and urban elites. However, with the passage of time its leadership passed into the hands of diverse groups. The civil disobedience movement widened its base. It brought many diverse groups with contradictory interests on a common platform-peasants, urban dwellers, villagers, industrialists, workers, capitalists, middle, lower and upper class and castes-all became members of Congress. Its leadership passed into hands of rural leaders with agricultural orientations. By Independence, Congress was a rainbow-like coalition representing Indian

diversity in terms of classes and castes, religions and languages and various interests.

Many groups merged their identity within the Congress. They continued to exist within the Congress as groups and individuals having different beliefs. The Congress accommodated the revolutionary and pacifist, conservative and radical, extremists and moderates the right and left and nearly all shades of the centre. It became a platform for a variety of groups, interests and political parties to take part in the movement. During pre-independent era, many political parties with their own constitution and organisational structure were allowed to operate within the fold of Congress. Few of these like the Congress Socialist Party, segregated later to become an opposition party. In spite of differences in programmes, methods and policies the party managed to conciliate if not resolve all differences and work on the basis of consensus.

### **Congress as Coalition: Policy of Tolerance and Management of Factions**

The coalition-like attributes of Congress lent an unusual strength to it. This can be proved from the following two points:

**(1) Principle of Accommodation:** A coalition broadly accommodates interests of all those who are a part and parcel of it. Coalition thus, has to neglect an extreme stand on an issue and has to strike a balance between all coalition partners. The hallmarks of a coalition are compromise and inclusiveness. Such a strategy weakens the opposition as any programme or ideology which the opposition wanted to say found place within the Congress.

**(2) Principle of Tolerance:** A party having a coalition nature has a greater tolerance of internal differences. It accommodates the ambitions of all groups and individuals. Congress pursued this policy during the nationalist movement and even after Independence. Thus, even if a group was unhappy with its position for power sharing within the party, it remained and fought within the party rather than leave the party and become an opposition.

Such groups within the party are known as factions. The coalition nature of Congress tolerated and managed to strike a balance between all the factions while a few of these factions were based on ideological considerations, most of

these were rooted in personal ambitions and rivalries. Internal factionalism rather than being a weakness was an internal strength of the Congress as the party gave room to all factions to fight with each other within the party. It helped Congress to retain leaders with different ideologies within its fold rather than going and fighting out by forming a new party.

The state units of the Congress had numerous factions. These factions took diverse ideological stream making the Congress look like a grand centrist party. The other parties normally attempted to influence these factions and thereby they influenced the policy making and decision-making indirectly. They did not exercise any real authority. They did not present an alternative to the ruling party. Instead, they influenced the Congress through pressure, censure and criticism. The existence of factions acted as a balancing mechanism within the ruling party. Congress was thus, the epicentre of political competition. Thus, Congress in the first decade of electoral competition was both a ruling party as well as an opposition party. This phase is thus, called 'Congress System'.

## **EMERGENCE OF OPPOSITION PARTIES**

Prior to 1967, opposition in India was dysfunctional, weak and divided. While Congress got 45-48% votes and 70-75% seats, no single opposition got more than 10 to 12 percent of vote or 5% seats. Likewise, in every election, independent candidates won 12-20% of the vote share.

This situation was due to the common inheritance of Congress, the ruling party and the opposition parties. Since opposition had no separate identity it was driven into wilderness. Many leaders who left Congress failed to mobilise votes and went into political oblivion. J.B. Kriplani, N.C. Ranga, Krishna Menon are examples of such leaders. However, there were some leaders like Charan Singh who were able to create a niche for themselves even after leaving Congress.

After Independence, there was no national level party besides the Congress. The first political Party to be recognised as such after Congress party was Bhartiya Jan Sangh (BJS) in 1951 founded by Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. This party represented Hindu nationalism. In 1959, Swatantra party was formed, idealising capitalism. Certain regional parties also emerged but they

were not of much significance. The 'Bhartiya Kranti Dal' and 'The Lok Dal' were formed after the separation of some disgruntled leaders from Congress party. In 1952 elections there were 2 socialist parties Socialist Party and Kisan Mazdoor Sabha. These merged to form People's Socialist Party. Later in 1955, one of these groups formed the 'Socialist Party' under Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia. Later Socialist Party and People's Socialist Party merged to form 'United Socialist Party' (USP). Later People's Socialist Party (PSP) was formed out of it. In 1974, USP merged into Bhartiya Lok Dal while PSP and Lok Dal merged into Janta Party. A significant attribute of all these parties were that they were at a point of time part of Congress party.

## **ROLE OF OPPOSITION PARTIES IN CONGRESS ERA**

India had a number of political parties at the time of Independence. Though these parties did not have much electoral gains, they were quite vibrant. Most of these parties had been active before 1952 only. In 1960s and 1970s these political parties played an important role.

Though the opposition had only a token representation they were quite helpful in maintaining the democratic character of the Indian polity. These parties offered a sustained but principled criticism of the programmes of the Congress party. It kept the ruling party under check and helped in changing the balance of power within the Congress. By providing an alternative these political parties prevented the resentment within the system from becoming anti-democratic. These parties also helped in grooming young leaders who played a crucial role in giving shape to the future of the country.

In the initial years, both the opposition and Congress leaders who were part of the interim government had a lot of respect for each other. This harmony continued even after independence. The first cabinet included leaders like Dr. Ambedkar and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in Nehru's government. Nehru even invited socialist leaders like Jaya Prakash Narayan to join the government. The personal relationship however, paved way for adversity with opposition after power competition became intense.

The first phase of Indian polity was thus, unique. The inclusive character of freedom movement led by Congress helped to attract leaders of different groups and interests, making it broad based social and ideological coalition. The key role of Congress in the freedom struggle gave it an advantage over the Opposition in the initial years. However, as the ability of Congress to accommodate all interests and aspirants declined, other political parties started gaining significance. The Congress dominance comprised of only one phase of the Indian political system.

**SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT**

**(COURTESY: NCERT)**

## **CHANGING METHODS OF VOTING**

These days we use an Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) to record voters' preferences. But that is not how we started. In the first general election, it was decided to place inside each polling booth a box for each candidate with the election symbol of that candidate. Each voter was given a blank ballot paper which they had to drop into the box of the candidate they wanted to vote for. About 20 lakh steel boxes were used for this purpose. A presiding officer from Punjab described how he prepared the ballot boxes—"Each box had to have its candidate's symbol, both inside and outside it, and outside on either side, had to be displayed the name of the candidate in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi along with the number of the constituency, the polling station and the polling booth. The paper seal with the numerical description of the candidate, signed by the presiding officer, had to be inserted in the token frame and its window closed by its door which had to be fixed in its place at the other end by means of a wire. All this had to be done on the day previous to the one fixed for polling. To fix symbols and labels the boxes had first to be rubbed with sandpaper or a piece of brick. I found that it took about five hours for six persons, including my two daughters, to complete this work. All this was done at my house."

After the first two elections this method was changed. Now the ballot paper carried the names and symbols of all the candidates and the voter was required to put a stamp on the name of the candidate they wanted to vote for. This method worked for nearly forty years. Towards the end of 1990s the Election Commission started using the EVM. By 2004 the entire country had shifted to the EVM.