

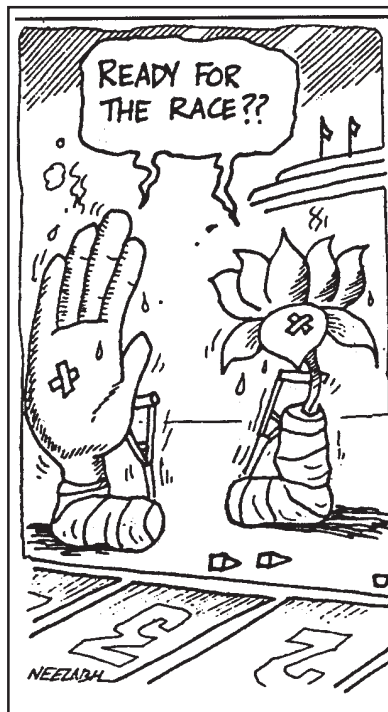
The BJP-Congress Tussle for Power

How Party Politics Destroys Our Education and Culture

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THERE seems to be widespread consensus in the country that nobody really wanted the elections we just witnessed, including those in the opposition parties who pulled down the government. The results show that the electorate does not consider any of the national parties worth trusting with a clear cut majority vote. The voters also refused to be swayed by exaggerated claims: the Kargil 'victory' failed to curry favour for the BJP, while the flaunted 'dynastic magic' of the Congress failed to catapult them back into power.

The BJP has not been able to increase its strength in any significant way, as it gained only one additional seat getting a total of 182 seats in the present Lok Sabha. However, it is noteworthy that its alliance partners have come back with greater numerical and political clout than last time. From 257 seats, the NDA alliance has increased its tally to 300 plus including National Conference. In contrast, the Congress party has given its worst ever electoral performance since 1952. It won even less seats than in the post-Emergency election of 1977, when Indira Gandhi suffered a crushing defeat. The mere 112 seats it secured are mostly from states where the Congress gained from the



electorate's disenchantment with the ruling coalition of BJP and its allies, as for example in Punjab.

Wherever the Congress party was in power, such as in Orissa, Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Goa, it has suffered major losses. It is also generally agreed that the winners on the Congress ticket are those who had a substantial following and political base of their own. Those who counted on the Sonia-Priyanka charisma have by and large faced humiliating defeats.

Thus, the Congress has been severely punished for repeatedly bringing down the central government through intrigue and foul play, even in states such as Delhi, Rajasthan and Goa, where they got a massive verdict a few months ago, as beneficiaries of the anti-incumbency sentiment against the BJP. The message is also clear that while the journalists' *biradari* might be swept off their feet by the many-splendoured charms of the Nehru-Indira dynasty, Indian voters are not as gullible. Glamour and imperious airs won't do. They are looking for skills in governance.

Not surprisingly, Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam party did not experience the fallout of anti-incumbency sentiment. Everyone agrees that the overwhelmingly positive response in its favour is proof of the voters' appreciation of its performance in Andhra Pradesh.

As important as the pro-performance vote for the TDP are the humiliations suffered by Laloo Yadav's party in Bihar, Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, and the puncturing of the Shiv Sena balloon in Maharashtra. The latter would surely have faced a much worse drubbing had the Congress party split not divided the anti-incumbency vote against the Shiv Sena – BJP alliance in Maharashtra.

It is clear that the people find greater safety for themselves in keeping their rulers insecure and uncertain. Hence, there is no clear majority for any party. The so-called 'national parties' now have to depend on regional parties and learn to cope with their diverse pulls and pressures. The era of highly centralised, authoritarian rule may finally be over. The need to develop a coalition culture is bound to smooth the blunt edges of all those parties involved in the exercise of forming multi-party governments. Most important of all, this is certain to lead to a further defanging of the BJP whose leaders have had to realise that mere jingoism will not bring them votes. They have to learn to carry larger segments of the people with them if they wish to reach the seats of power through the democratic process.

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Even though there was widespread annoyance over the fact that our politicians fought the 1999 election over non-issues, some people tried to lend this electoral battle an ideological respectability. The desperation of the Congress party to dislodge the BJP has been interpreted in two ways. Those who are against the BJP declared it to be a move to unite the left secular forces in order to defeat a communal party and save Indian democracy. This interpretation would appear bizarre to all except those suffering total amnesia. The role of the Congress in fomenting communal hatred and riots, instigating massacres of vulnerable groups, and playing one community against the other to capture vote banks, has been no less vicious than that of the BJP, though less ideologically motivated and more opportunistic. In fact, it would not

be wrong to say that it was during the Congress party regimes of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi that the seeds of communal discord were sowed in our country. The BJP merely reaped the harvest.

However, the days when voters fell into the trap of politicians who provoke hatred and instigate inter-community violence seem to be mercifully over. Throughout the nation, parties have had to change the tone and tenor of their political programmes and campaigns. Leaders who tended to resort to divisive appeals are increasingly snubbed at the hustings. No wonder even BSP leader Mayawati has had to talk of

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representing *sarva samaj* (the whole society) rather than pitching Dalits against all other castes. The BSP did surprisingly well in UP this time after witnessing a stagnation of their support base. In the recent election, their leaders went out of their way to woo non-Dalit votes by putting up "upper caste" candidates in a number of strategic constituencies. Likewise, the BJP has had to disown its own past agenda, which their leaders admit was "contentious" and "divisive," as a necessary step towards gaining wider acceptability.

Those who are sympathetic to the BJP viewed Operation Topple as a coup attempt motivated

exclusively by Sonia Gandhi's ambition to occupy the prime ministerial throne. BJP sympathisers thus projected it as a battle royal between *swadeshi* and *videshi*.

However, the conflict between the Congress and the BJP is not confined solely to a tussle over who is to be in the prime minister's seat and in the various ministerial chairs. The desperation of the Congress party, for example, was born out of a much more widespread fear at all levels that if the BJP managed to stay in power long enough, they would perhaps succeed in shutting out the opposition from access to all the loaves and fishes of power. There is no political programme and set of beliefs about policy issues that determines the commitments of our politicians. Out of power for more than a brief period and without funds to keep their mercenaries in line, our political parties tend to disintegrate. The existence of our politicians depends on ensuring that a regular flow of loot and patronage passes through their sticky hands. This can only be extorted by running the government and all the *sarkari* institutions it dominates.

The real conflict is over which party is to have the monopoly of making appointments and granting patronage by nominating its own cronies to preside over key institutions. These include the vast resources for corruption that can be tapped by manipulating decisions of the various ministries, sundry Corporations, the Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), many of the supposedly autonomous government financed institutions that make up the organised sector of the economy, and the plethora of cultural and educational institutions controlled by the government.

Even though cultural institutions are not anywhere near as good a source of loot as, for example, the PSUs, yet they play a vital part in establishing a party's cultural hegemony. Therefore, having a grip over them is viewed as an essential prerequisite for holding on to their power against all actual and potential sources of challenge to their misrule. In the last century, in many countries students, academics, artists, writers, religious organisations and other cultural groupings have been a key component in the initial core of opposition to corrupt, incompetent and repressive regimes, whenever they can gain a measure of independence from the powers that be. That is exactly why even those who might consider dismantling the PSUs to avert fiscal catastrophe are not as willing to let the educational and cultural institutions acquire genuine autonomy.

As a result of the misuse of our cultural institutions, we are witnessing their widespread deterioration and decay. Take the example of those in Delhi. Recently, as has become traditional, when Congress came to power at the state level, the BJP nominees in the governing bodies of all colleges began to be replaced by Congress party nominees. The BJP government engages in exactly the same type of nepotism during its regime. The party in power takes it as its prerogative to ensure that, during its tenure, only its own party members and sympathisers are appointed to teaching, administrative and governing positions. Thus, political battles at the state or central level are transferred to every college and university. Teachers and administrators end up being divided on the basis of their party affiliations, and all issues are filtered through the prism of party politics in the crudest, ugliest sense of the term.



It is the same in other major academic, scientific and cultural institutions like the Indian Council for Historical Research, Indian Council for Social Science Research, Sahitya Academy, the Sangeet Natak Academy, as well as Doordarshan and All India Radio. The latter two are unashamedly used as powerful propaganda instruments for the ruling party, leading to serious erosion of their professional credibility. This is also how anti-social elements often come to preside over our social welfare boards. In this game of strengthening your own political gang by monopolising all appointments, service to society and skill-based merit are the biggest casualties.

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In essence, the current alliance against the BJP has little to do with the defence of secularism. If we understand the term secularism in its original meaning, it connotes a commitment to refrain religious authorities from interfering in the political domain. In western Europe, secularism was the product of a compromise settlement between the conflicting diversity of religious authorities within and among different states, subsequent to their success in challenging the hierarchical authority of the Roman Catholic church. In India, we face the very opposite challenge. Here, there is no centralised religious authority nor competing religious leaders who have the means to aspire to control and dominate politics. In our country, we don't need to save the political domain from encroachments by religious agencies. Instead, we need to prevent politicians from taking over religious institutions by force, fraud and bureaucratic intervention and make them serve their political and financial needs.

Once again, there is no difference between the conduct of parties from the left and right. The story of the BJP's takeover of various temples in north India is well known, and has also attracted widespread criticism (for one such account, see MANUSHI 79).

However, insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that the Congress and the left parties do similar things whenever they are in dominant positions. Take the example of Kerala. When the CPM comes to power, they attempt to pack their own sympathisers and party cadres into the management committees of important temples and *devasthanams* in that state. As soon as the CPM loses power to a Congress-dominated coalition, the latter tries to replace the nominees of the CPM with their own loyal agents. Thus, whoever wins the electoral contest wrests control over

the vast incomes and influence generated by these religious institutions. That is a major reason why many of our leading temples have been converted into battlegrounds fought over by rival groups of politicians. In fact, the Khalistani movement in Punjab was a direct product of the attempt by the Indira Congress to wrest control over the vast gurudwara network from the grip of the Akali party through its domination in the Shiroman Gurudwara Prabhndhak Committee. (see MANUSHI 30)



The eagerness of a section of leaders of the left parties to support the Congress' move to grab power ought not to come as a surprise when we understand the stakes involved. Left intellectuals of all shades (barring some sections of the CPML engaged in war against the state) thrive under Congress regimes as a result of the Nehruvian legacy of patronising and co-opting elite leftist intellectuals. This in turn can be attributed to the fact that the left intelligentsia, as a group, have been the staunchest supporters of state controls over the economy and all its social and cultural institutions. They have had a symbiotic relationship with the Congress and the bureaucracy right from the time when Nehru took over the governance of post-independence India. Most of the well known Congress ideologues had past associations with one communist party or another. Even the top echelons of the Indian bureaucracy are packed with people who were Marxists and even Naxalites during their student days. From Nehru's time onward, the major recruiting centres for the Indian Civil Service, as well as the Foreign Service, have been institutions like St. Stephen's College (Delhi) and Presidency College (Calcutta), which have specialised in producing Marxists of various hues.

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Jawaharlal Nehru University was consciously created as a citadel of leftist intellectuals, where bright and promising students come from all over India to pick up the right doses of leftist jargon that has somehow become part of the expected qualification for those entering the IAS exam.

It is this mutually interdependent relationship which makes many left parties desperate for the restoration of Congress rule. They fear that if the BJP appointees succeed in consolidating their power in socio-cultural institutions, the leftists will be forever excluded, just as under Congress rule, BJP sympathisers found it difficult to reach positions of power in centres of culture and education.

Indeed, the BJP has been rapidly weakening the left and Congress' stranglehold over many institutions that require the intelligentsia, including the higher levels of the bureaucracy. However, in this game, the BJP is relatively disadvantaged. The Sangh Parivar, with its crude, poorly conceptualised, and highly discriminatory political agenda of *Hindutva*, has produced very few, if any, intellectuals or academics of worth. The institutions founded by the Sangh Parivar, including their schools, are not known for producing excellence in any field. Even so, they do not hesitate to cram these places with poorly qualified people, their sole criterion for selection being party loyalty. As a result, their attempts to

fill up all important posts in these organisations with votaries of *Hindutva* is likely to lead to further erosion of our already low academic and cultural standards.

Such political struggles for control over our religious, academic and artistic institutions are destroying the very foundations of our society. If we want our politics to acquire a measure of responsibility and respectability, if we value the vital role that engaged intellectuals of integrity can play in desperately needed social reform, we need to insulate them from the narrow self-seeking short term influence of our unthinking politicians and bureaucrats, with their insatiable lust for power and propensity to loot.

It is imperative that we create autonomous but democratically responsive structures that will enable our educational and cultural institutions to recruit capable, earnest, and independent people who have the authority to protect their organisations from the depredations of the politicians and the bureaucrats. Only then will our intellectuals have the latitude to perform the crucial role required of them — holding a critical mirror up to our society, enabling people to evolve a vision of a just and humane order, figuring out where we have gone wrong, and making creative suggestions about what can be done to bring about the urgently required changes and lead us out of our ruinous stagnation. And if our social institutions begin to function autonomously and purposefully, the importance of ministerial chairs will automatically reduce, and subsequently so will the deadly battles over seats of political power. □

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