



Indian National Congress after Independence: An Overview

Nasiruddin Sk, *Research scholar, Dept. of Pol Science, Kazi Nazrul University, West Bengal, India*

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Abstract

The establishment of the National Congress is a historic event in the history of Indian politics. The National Congress has been influencing Indian politics since long before independence till the present day. The role of National Congress in Indian politics as well as India's independence cannot be denied in any way. The Indian National Congress had played a leading role in highlighting various demands of the country through various movements and social programs in India. Independence was a new dawn for the people of India after a long struggle. Since 1947, the country has embarked on a new journey. The National Congress played a pioneering role in repairing the wounds left over from the colonial era like economic underdevelopment, extreme poverty, almost universal illiteracy, gross social inequality and injustices. Congress's contribution to Nation building after independence is unparalleled. The new India was given the priority of those things like nationalism, secularism, expansion of democracy, rapid economic development etc., which the National Congress and its leaders were able to do. When the general elections (1951-1952) were held after independence, the Congress gave to the country a stable government at the centre and in most of the states. Congress was the main instrument of political stability in India for several decades. The Congress used to act as a means of conciliation and conciliation between different class interests, sectional interests, regional interests etc. the congress also had the power to pacify, accommodate and accommodate the individual and rival opinions within the party. Besides appeasing the resentment of the properties and socially dominant groups, the Congress was also able to appeal to the poor and the deprived. The character of Congress in Indian politics was totalitarian and universal.

Keywords: Congress, Leadership, Congress's Split, Congress's Performance, Punjab Crisis, Garibi Hatao

Introduction

The establishment of the Indian national congress in 1885 AD is a landmark event in the history of the Indian nationalism and freedom struggle. Dr. Ramesh Chandra Majumder said

"In the history of the world, not a single instance can be found in any era or country, where a political institution has served as the focal point of the motherland's freedom struggle against foreign rule for more than sixty years."¹

It is undeniable that many parties and organizations besides the congress were involved in the national liberation struggle, but it is also true that the Congress was the central figure in this long and difficult struggle. The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was not just an accident. The establishment of the Indian National Congress was the culmination of the all-India expansion of political consciousness in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the seventies and eighties. The extreme racial hatred of the British towards Indians, the extreme imperialist exploitation in India, the indifference of the British government towards Indian interests, the unlimited unemployment of the countrymen, the reactionary repression policies of Lord Lytton and the Ilbert Bill controversy raised the consciousness of the Indian people to a new level. Meanwhile, various political associations were also established in different regions of India. In the same time, Indian leaders for a long time they realized the need to established an all-India political institution. In a favourable climate, the Indian National Congress was established on 28th December 1885AD. The first session of the Indian National Congress (December 28-30) was held with 72 delegates at the Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College Hall in Mumbai under the chairmanship of Umesh Chandra Banerjee (a prominent lawyer from Calcutta).

After Indian independence in 1947, the Indian national congress became the dominant political party in the country. It was a party to consolidate India under one umbrella through the performing the role system maintenance of the nation. In the first general election held after independence (1951-1952), the Indian national congress swept to power in the national parliament and the most of legislature of the states. It occupied the power in the national level until 1977 when it was defeated by the Janata Coalition. It returned to power in 1980 and ruled 1989 when it was once again defeated. The party formed the government in 1991 at the head of a coalition, as well as in 2004 and 2009 when it led the United Progressive Alliance.

Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri Period (1947-1966)

From 1951 until his death in 1964, Jawaharlal Nehru was the supreme leader of the party. Congress gained power in landslide victories in the general election of 1951-1952, 1957, and 1962.² Because the absence of strong opposition in that period. During his tenure, Pandit Nehru implemented some important policies which were based on import substitution industrialisation. He advocated a mixed economy, where the government controlled public sector and private sector co-existed with each other.³ Nehru believed on the establishment of basic and heavy industries which indicate the fundamental development and the modernisation of the Indian economy. The Nehru government was prejudice to primarily investment into key public sector industries like- iron, steel, power; coal etc. to promoting their development. Nehru was involved with the concept of secularism. He believed on socialistic economic practices which were based on state driven industrialisation. Non-aligned and non-confrontational foreign policy was an important concept of Pandit Nehru that became typical of the modern Congress party.⁴ during the cold war period, the policy of non-alignment was used by Pandit Nehru gained to receive the financial and technical support from the both blocs (Eastern and Western) to build India's industrial base.⁵

In 1964, Nehru died and raising the questions about the Indian National Congress party's future. After the death of Nehru, Gulzarilal Nanda was appointed as the interim prime minister on 27 may 1964 due to pending the election of a new parliamentary leader

of the Indian National Congress. During the leadership contest to succeed Nehru, the preference was between Morarji Desai and Lal Bahadur Shastri. Finally, Lal Bahadur Shastri was selected as the next parliamentary leader (prime minister, 1964-1966). And it thought to be, Kamaraj was the kingmaker for ensure the victory of Lal Bahadur Shastri over Morarji Desai. Shastri (as a prime minister) retained most of the members of the Nehru's council of minister. Like- T.T Krishna Acharya (Finance minister of India), Yashwantrao Chavan (Defence minister), Indira Gandhi (Minister of information and broadcasting), Gulzarilal Nanda (Minister of home affairs), Swaran Singh (External affairs minister). As a prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri continued to the policy of non-alignment (Nehru's policy), but he was built a closer relationship with the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). After the Sino-Indian war of 1962, and the formation of military knot between China and Pakistan, Shastri's government increased the defence budget of India's armed forces. He also promoted the white Revolution (A national campaign to increase the production and supply of milk) by creating the NDDB (National Dairy Development Board).⁶The Madras anti-Hindu agitation (1965) was occurred during Lal Bahadur Shastri's period.⁷ Lal Bahadur Shastri became a national hero for the victory of the Indo-Pak war (1965). His slogan, "Jai Jawan Jai Kisan" became very popular during the war.⁸After the end of the war, the Tashkent Declaration was sign by Shastri on 10th January 1966, and he died (11th January 1966) a very next day. After Shastri's death, Congress elected Indira Gandhi as leader. In that case once again, K. Kamaraj was the main instrument behind of this result. In that situation, the differences of the thinking among the top leaders of the Congress regarding the future of the Indian National Congress become clear. As a result, the formation of several breakaway parties from Indian National Congress (Utkal Congress, Orissa Jana Congress, Bharatiya Kranti Dal, Bangla Congress etc).

Indira Period (1966-1977, 1980-1984)

After a poor performance in the Indian general election of 1967, Indira Gandhi started moving toward the political left. Congress parliamentary board nominated by a vote of Neelam Sanjiv Reddy; he was a Congress's candidate for the post of president of India on 12 July 1969. Morarji Desai, S.K. Patil and K. Kamaraj voted to the favour of Sanjiv Reddy, on the other hand, Indira Gandhi and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed voted to the favour of V.V. Giri. And Yashwantrao Chavan, S. Nijalingappa and Jagjivan Ram abstained from voting. In mid-1969, Indira Gandhi was involved in a dispute with senior party leaders on several issues. Such as- Her support to the favour of independent candidate V.V. Giri, rather than the official congress party candidate Neelam Sanjib Reddy for the vacant post of the president of India.

Congress split and Formation of Congress (I)

In 1967, the Congress faced its first serious challenge. Internal conflicts and crises arose within the Congress after defeat of the Congress in the election of 1967. As a result, in 1969, the Congress split into two factions due to conflict. One is the ruling Congress (Congress 'R') and the other is the Organization Congress (Congress 'O'). Later the ruling Congress got the recognition of National Congress. The second breakdown of the Congress was seen after the 1977 elections. During this period too, the internal conflict of the Congress came to light cantered around the election disaster. In 1977, Congress was ousted from central power. In 1978, the Congress party split into two. One group came to be known as the

Congress (I). The group was formed under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The leader of the other group was Brahmananda Reddy. This group came to be known as the Congress (R), (R for Reddy). Later, the then Karnataka Congress leader Devraj Ars became the president of this group and the party was named Ars Congress (Congress 'U' for short). In 1981, the Election Commission recognized the Congress (I) as the Indian National Congress.

In the mid-term of the 1971 General election of India, the Indira led Congress (R) and won a landslide victory on the base of a platform of progressive policies, such as the elimination of poverty (Garibi Hatao).⁹ The policies of the Congress (R) under Indira before the 1971 elections included proposals to abolish the privy purse to former rulers of the princely states (in 1969, this policy attempt by Indira government to abolish the privy purse but the official recognition of the title did not meet with success. The constitutional amendment bill to this effect was passed in Lok Sabha, but it failed to get the required two-thirds majority in the Rajya Sabha. However, in 1971, the 26th amendment to the constitution of India, the privy purse was abolished), and the nationalisation of India's 14 largest Banks.¹⁰

On 12 June 1975, the Allahabad High Court declared that Indira Gandhi's election to the Lok Sabha void on the grounds of electoral malpractice. However, Gandhi rejected the proposal of resign and announced plans to appeal to the Supreme Court. In response to increasing disorder and lawlessness, Indira's ministry recommended to President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to declare a national emergency, based on the provisions of Article 352 of the Indian Constitution. During the nineteen-month emergency, widespread oppression and abuse of power occurred by Gandhi's unelected younger son and political heir Sanjay Gandhi and his close associates.¹¹ The emergency was implemented on 25 June 1975, and its officially ended on 21 March 1977. After that the fresh election for the Lok Sabha were called. The parliamentary election was held in March, the Janata alliance (anti-Indira's opposition parties) won 295 seats in this Lok Sabha election against Congress (won 153 seats). In this election, Indira Gandhi lost her seat to her opponent Raj Narain. On 2 January 1978, Indira Gandhi and her supporters separate and formed a new opposition party, popularly called Congress (I) – the "I" denoting Indira. In the next year, Indira's new party attracted enough members of the legislature to become the official opposition. Indira Gandhi regained a parliamentary seat in November 1978. In January 1980, after landslide victory for Congress (I), she was again elected prime minister. The national election commission declared Congress (I) to be the Indian National Congress.

Punjab Exigency

Indira Gandhi's premiership was witnessed of increasing turmoil in Punjab; this turmoil was happened for the demands of Sikh autonomy by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his militant followers. In 1983, Bhindranwale and his armed followers started accumulating weapons in the Golden Temple in Amritsar. In June 1984, after several futile negotiations, Gandhi ordered to the Indian Army to enter the Golden Temple to establish control over the situation and remove Bhindranwale and his armed followers. This incident is known as Operation Blue Star.¹² On 31 October 1984, two of Gandhi's bodyguards, (Beant Singh and Satwant Singh) shot her with their service weapons in the garden of the prime minister's residence, because her authorisation of Operation Blue Star.

Rajib Gandhi (1984-1989) and P.V. Narsimha Rao (1991-1996) Period

In 1984, Rajiv Gandhi (Indira Gandhi's son) became nominal head of the congress, and went on to become Prime Minister after Indira's assassination in December 1984, he led Indian National Congress to a landslide victory, where it achieved 401 seats in the parliament. His administration took a positive step to reform the system of government bureaucracy and liberalise the country's economy. Rajiv Gandhi attempts to depress the separatist movements in Punjab and Kashmir. After his government became embroiled in several financial scams, his leadership became gradually ineffective. Gandhi was regarded as a non-abrasive person, because who consulted with other party members in the time of decisions. The Bofors scam damaged his reputation as an honest politician, but he was cleared of bribery allegations in 2004 (few years later of his death).¹³ On 21 May 1991, Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a bomb hidden in a basket of flowers which carried by a woman who was associated with the Tamil Tigers. In the time of incident, He was campaigning in Tamil Nadu for upcoming parliamentary elections. In 1998, an Indian court convicted 26 people for the conspiracy to assassinate Gandhi.¹⁴ The conspirators, who consisted of Tamil militants from Sri Lanka and their Indian allies. They had sought revenge against Rajiv Gandhi, because in 1987, he ended the Indian troops to Sri Lanka to help enforce a peace accord there had fought with Tamil militant guerrillas.¹⁵

The mid-1990s marked a period of political stream in India, because in that time occurred frequent changes in government and coalition dynamics. After Rajiv Gandhi, P.V. Narasimha Rao was elected prime minister in June 1991. Narasimha's rise to the prime ministership was politically significant because before him, nobody did not elect from South India to hold the office. This event ensures that it's a shift from the traditionally northern-dominated leadership in Indian politics. Narasimha Rao did not contest elections in 1991, but after he was taking an oath as prime minister, he won in a by-election from Nandyal in Andhra Pradesh.¹⁶ His administration took step on some major economic change and faced several domestic events that affected India's national security.¹⁷ Narasimha Rao held the industries portfolio, and he was dismantling the Licence Raj system (the Licence Raj or Permit Raj is a pejorative for the system of strict government control and regulation of the Indian economy), which came under the control of the ministry of commerce and Industry. He appoints Dr. Manmohan Singh as his finance minister to start historic economic changes in the country. With Rao's mandate, Manmohan Singh launched the reforms policies for India's globalisation that involved implementing policies of International Monetary Fund (IMF) to prevent India's economic collapse. Later, Atal Bihari Bajpayee and Manmohan Singh continued the economic reforms policies those started by Narasimha's government. For his contribution on economic reforms policies, He is called the "Father of Indian economic reforms".¹⁸ P.V. Narasimha Rao's was also referred to as Chanakya for his ability to push tough economic and political legislation through the parliament. By 1996, Indian National Congress found itself in a complex political situation. Party faced internal challenges like- factionalism and struggle for leadership among members, allegations of corruption, and anti-party sentiment among members. The 1996 general elections were witnessed of a fractured mandate. Because, any single political party did not get a clear majority in this election. Congress was reduced to 140 seats in elections that year, its lowest number for Indian National Congress in the Lok Sabha yet. Later, Narasimha Rao resigned as prime minister and as well as party president. He was followed as party president by Sitaram Kesri, who

was the first non-Brahmin leader in the chair of party president of Indian National Congress. During the tenure of them, they conducted internal elections to the Congress working committees and as well as their own posts as party presidents of Indian National Congress.

Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh Period (1998-2014)

The 1998 general elections Indian National Congress won 141 seats in the Lok Sabha. To improve the party's popularity and its performance in the imminent election, the Congress leaders urged Sonia Gandhi (Rajiv Gandhi's widow) to accept the leadership of the Indian National Congress. Before that, she had previously declined these kinds of proposal to become actively involved in party affairs, and she had stayed away from politics. After her election as a party leader, a section of the Congress party objected to the choice because of her Italian ethnicity. As a result, one part of party's leaders formed the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), which led by Sharad Pawar.¹⁹

Sonia Gandhi struggled to revive the party's situation, when she was its president. Sonia Gandhi was continuous under scrutiny for her lack of political discernment and foreign birth. In election of 1999 (which called by National Democratic Alliance government), the Congress plummeted to just 114 seats.²⁰ Although afterwards; the party campaigned strongly in the assembly elections. But leadership structure was unaltered. Sonia Gandhi starts to make such strategic changes as abandoning the 'eklachalo' (go alone) policy in the party's 1998 pachmarhi resolution, and formed alliances with other political parties. In the intervening years, the party was successful at one point- Congress ruled 15 states.²¹ For the 2004 general election, Congress alliances with some regional parties including the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The party's campaign emphasised on social inclusion and the welfare of the common masses. Another attractive slogan such as 'Congress ka haath, aam aadmi ke saath'²² (Congress hand in with the common man) was used for the election campaign. On the other hand, the NDA's 'India Shining'²³ campaign was also very famous. In this election, The Congress led united progressive alliance (UPA) won 222 seats in the new parliament, and defeat the NDA by a big margin. Congress won a majority and formed a new government with the subsequent support of the communist front.

Despite the massive support from within the party, Sonia Gandhi declined the post of prime minister. Instead, she choosing to appoint Manmohan Singh for it.²⁴ but she remained in the post of party president and headed the National Advisory Council (NAC). In that period, the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government passed numerous social reform bills, such as- the employment guarantee bill, the right to education act; the Right to Information Act etc. in this situation, UPA was in the driving seat in Indian parliament. But few months later, The Left Front withdrew its support from the UPA due to disagreements about the U.S. - India Civil Nuclear Agreement. As a result, UPA lost 62 seats in parliament, in spite of that, the UPA government was stand on its position.²⁵

In the Lok Sabha elections of 2009, Congress won 206 seats; it was the highest total of any party since 1991. In this election, The UPA won 262 and enabling it to form a government for the second time. The social welfare policies of the first UPA government, and the divisive policy of the BJP, played the vital role of the victory²⁶. In 2004 and 2009, when the Congress failed to win the majority in the Lok Sabha elections alone, the

Congress led UPA coalition came to power and ran the government for the entire term. But in 2014 Lok Sabha election, the Congress suffered, and won only 44 seats alone.²⁷

Rahul Gandhi and Present Period (2014 to continue)

In 2014 election, the Congress had lost the popular support, due to several years of poor economic conditions in the country, allegations of corruption to the government officials, Indian coal allocation scam,²⁸ 2G spectrum case and more.²⁹ In 2014 general election, The Indian National Congress won only 44 seats, other hand, BJP led NDA won 336 seats in that election. As a result, the UPA suffered a landslide defeat, which was the Congress's worst electoral performance in the history of Indian parliamentary elections after independence. Its vote dipping below 20 percent for the first time.³⁰ After a long period having served, in December 2017, Sonia Gandhi retired as party president. After Sonia, her son Rahul Gandhi was elected as president of Indian National Congress in 2017.

After the 2019 Lok Sabha election, Rahul Gandhi resigned from his post due to the party's disappointment electoral performance. In this election, The Indian National Congress won only 52 seats, which was eight more than the previous election. But once again, its percentage of vote was below 20 percent. After Rahul Gandhi's resignation, party's members began deliberations for a suitable candidate to replace Rahul Gandhi. Therefore, all members of the Congress working committee assemble on 10 August to make a final decision on the matter and passed a resolution. It's decided by this resolution, Sonia Gandhi was asked to take over as interim president of the party until a consensus candidate could be picked. After the election, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhuri and Gaurav Gogoi was chosen as the leader and deputy leader of the Indian National Congress in the Lok Sabha respectively. According to the report of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADF) and National Election Watch (NEW), the Indian National Congress has highest political defection since 2014. The report also says, total 222 electoral candidates (including 177 MPs and MLAs) had left the Congress and join others parties between the 2014 general election to 2021.³¹ As a result of defection, Congress has loss of the party's established governments in some states like, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Pondicherry, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Goa.

For the succeed Rahul Gandhi, the Congress working Committee (CWC) passed a resolution on 28 August 2022 for election of the next president of the Indian National Congress. The election was held on 17 October 2022 and its result was declared on 19 October 2022. In this election, the candidate in the race was Mallikarjun Kharge (MP of Karnataka) and Shashi Tharoor (MP of Kerala). Kharge won the election in a landslide victory over Shashi Tharoor. Kharge secured 7897 out of 9385 votes cast and Shashi Tharoor got 1072 votes.

After elected as a party president, Kharge led the Congress into the 2024 general election. The party has made significant gains in some states. In this election, the Indian National Congress got 99 seats, which was the best result for the party since 2009 general election. Now, The Indian National Congress is the main opposition party within the INDIA alliance which was formed in 2023, and Rahul Gandhi is the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha.

Congress's performance in the history of general elections

Year	Election	Seats won	Vote %	Party leader
1951	1 st Lok Sabha election	364 seats	44.99%	Jawaharlal Nehru

1957	2 nd Lok Sabha election	371 seats	47.78%	Jawaharlal Nehru
1962	3 rd Lok Sabha election	361 seats	44.72%	Jawaharlal Nehru
1967	4 th Lok Sabha election	283 seats	40.78%	Indira Gandhi
1971	5 th Lok Sabha election	352 seats	43.68%	Indira Gandhi
1977	6 th Lok Sabha election	153 seats	34.52%	Indira Gandhi
1980	7 th Lok Sabha election	351 seats	42.69%	Indira Gandhi
1984	8 th Lok Sabha election	415 seats	49.01%	Rajiv Gandhi
1989	9 th Lok Sabha election	197 seats	39.53%	Rajiv Gandhi
1991	10 th Lok Sabha election	244 seats	35.66%	P.V. Narsimha Rao
1996	11 th Lok Sabha election	140 seats	28.80%	P.V. Narsimha Rao
1998	12 th Lok Sabha election	141 seats	25.82%	Sitaram Kesri
1999	13 th Lok Sabha election	114 seats	28.30%	Sonia Gandhi
2004	14 th Lok Sabha election	145 seats	26.70%	Sonia Gandhi
2009	15 th Lok Sabha election	206 seats	28.55%	Dr. Manmohan Singh
2014	16 th Lok Sabha election	44 seats	19.30%	Rahul Gandhi
2019	17 th Lok Sabha election	52 seats	19.50%	Rahul Gandhi
2024	18 th Lok Sabha election	99 seats	21.96%	Mallikarjun Kharge

Conclusion

After independence, the economic, political and social situation has been greatly improved by the Indian National Congress. Because these were the primary responsibility of the National Congress after coming to power the later of the first general elections (1951-1952). The Indian National Congress dominated Indian politics from the first general election to until 1977. But in the sixth Lok Sabha election (1977), Congress was defeated by a coalition government led by the Janata Dal. Since then, the national politics has continued to alternate between the Congress party and other parties or alliances. Congress moved away from its monopoly. Some policies by the Congress like nationalization of Bank, frequent declaration of national emergency, frequent and arbitrary constitutional amendments etc. are blamed for the drift away. Moreover, many critics criticize the Congress as a 'family party'. The reason for the decline of the Indian National Congress in Indian politics is not only internal. In the sphere of contemporary national politics, a communal mindset by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and some of its allies has pushed the National Congress far behind.

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