



Crisis as opportunity

The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty must withdraw without leaving a vacuum in the Congress

Sonia Gandhi's return as the Congress party president – an interim measure, apparently – ends the leadership vacuum since the party's massive defeat in the 17th Lok Sabha election, but only superficially. When Rahul Gandhi succeeded her in 2017, Ms. Gandhi had held the post for 19 years, the longest tenure for anyone in the party's 134-year history. Despite a spirited poll campaign, Mr. Gandhi could not reverse the fortunes of the party that had already been in a free-fall. In what some of his party leaders thought was an impetuous decision, he resigned as the party president, after the Lok Sabha defeat, pushing the organisation into a tailspin. While the collapse of the party was on his watch, its vitals had been corroded in the years before he took over. While holding that post for nearly two decades was unwise, the cardinal failure of Ms. Gandhi's leadership was in not preparing the ground for a transition, even if it were to be within the family. Mr. Gandhi who was to take over as party president, did not join the government, undermining his credibility as a Prime Ministerial aspirant. While Ms. Gandhi allowed politics to be reduced to intrigues in her durbar, Mr. Gandhi spent his time on misjudged priorities such as revamping the student and youth wings of the party.

In her second coming as party chief, Ms. Gandhi must use her authority to not only pave the way for a smooth transition of leadership but also ensure that the role of the family in the party is reimagined. It is true that in the absence of any coherent unifying thought – as evidenced in the squabble among its leaders over the Centre's decision to unilaterally change the constitutional status of J&K – the family has been the glue that held the Congress together. However, what used to be the best solution for all crises in the Congress – the surname – is itself a crisis for the party, in the current political climate. The focused attack on the Nehru-Gandhi legacy by the advancing Hindutva troops has contributed to the diminishing influence of the family, but the fact is also that an increasing number of people abhor dynasty politics and the privileges associated with it. Ms. Gandhi has an opportunity, nay a responsibility, to proactively help the old guard and the younger generation within the Congress to reconcile their differences and devise a common purpose of existence. At the helm of the party yet again, Ms. Gandhi must now focus on ending the centrality of the family in Congress, in a thoughtful manner.

Strongman candidate

Gotabaya nomination may strengthen view that Rajapaksa are pursuing family interests

In naming his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa as his party's presidential candidate, former Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa has apparently gone by his instinctive understanding that the people may favour a strong leader who prioritises internal security. Mr. Gotabaya, a former defence secretary credited with being the brain behind the crushing military defeat inflicted on the Liberation Tigers in 2009, is the candidate of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). The party was launched in 2016 by Mahinda Rajapaksa loyalists, but he has taken over its leadership only now. Sri Lanka is set to have a presidential election before the year is out, one that would be a virtual referendum on the performance of a power-sharing arrangement between political rivals from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP). The alliance of Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe came to power in 2015 on the promise of 'good governance', and a democratic departure from nearly a decade of authoritarian rule, majoritarian triumphalism and denudation of democratic institutions under Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe combination does not seem to have done enough to revive the economy or introduce political and economic reforms. Their alliance collapsed last year due to persistent differences, and in October 2018, Mr. Sirisena sought to replace Mr. Wickremesinghe with Mr. Rajapaksa. The courts stalled the move and restored the UNP leader's office. Earlier this year, the Easter Sunday bomb blasts in churches and hotels, may have brought back popular apprehensions about national security and accentuated differences in the multi-ethnic country. In this backdrop, the candidature of Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa is no surprise.

However, Mr. Gotabaya's presence in the fray comes with its own controversies. His strongman image evokes fear among minorities. His name is linked with war crimes, murder, corruption cases as well as with the infamous 'white van abductions' that led to many disappearances. That he holds dual citizenship is another controversy, but it is now claimed he has renounced his U.S. citizenship and obtained a new Sri Lankan passport. With Mr. Mahinda likely to aim for the PM's position in a Gotabaya presidency, the candidacy may reinforce their detractors' view that the Rajapaksas are keen on securing their family's interests. His brother Basil Rajapaksa recently said in support of Mr. Gotabaya that elimination of corruption in Sri Lanka "needs a terminator", but the appellation only evoked sarcastic approbation for its deadly and destructive import. He will most likely have the support of President Sirisena's SLFP. However, the UNP is yet to decide on its candidate. It will have to choose from among its leader, Mr. Wickremesinghe, deputy leader Sajith Premadasa, and Parliament Speaker Karu Jayasuriya. A larger question now is whether Sri Lanka still believes in the platform of reform and progress that decided the 2015 elections, or would not mind a reversion to the Rajapaksa era.

An abrogation of democratic principles

The Kashmir move affects the robust nature of Indian democracy in addressing internal conflicts and alienation



NAVNITA CHADHA BEHERA

The recent abrogation of Article 370 ending the special status of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) in the Indian Constitution along with the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Bill, 2019, bifurcating the State into two Union Territories (J&K and Ladakh), have delivered a knock-out blow to the long-drawn-out peace process in Kashmir.

These moves also herald a paradigm shift in the fundamental premises and parameters of India's approach towards the Kashmir issue, with long-term implications for its political strategy of tackling such internal conflicts. There are three cardinal principles which successive political regimes have hitherto followed in addressing internal conflicts and seeking political reconciliation with alienated segments of the populace. These in turn have bolstered the robust and resilient nature of Indian democracy. The future, however, appears much more uncertain. Here is why.

Accommodative parameters

The first principle entails adhering to the letter and spirit of the Indian Constitution. Its far-sighted and malleable nature has stood the test of time. Since 1947, India has faced a wide-ranging nature of political demands ranging from secession, to the creation of a separate State for Jammu, Union Territory status for Ladakh and others seeking affirmative discrimination for the Dogri language, Scheduled Tribe status for Gujjars and Paharis and so on.

In response, the central leadership has tried finding ways and means within the overarching parameters of the Indian Constitu-

tion and have rarely been disappointed. In view of the difficult circumstances under which the Dogra Maharaja Hari Singh had acceded to India, Article 370 itself offered an excellent example as to how the special needs and political aspirations of the people of J&K could be politically and constitutionally accommodated by India's Constitution makers.

Decades later, when Ladakhi Buddhists launched an agitation in 1989, demanding Union Territory status, the Indian Constitution once again made space for political experimentation by introducing intermediate state structures – the creation of two autonomous hill councils for Leh and Kargil.

Weakening federalism

Against this backdrop, it is for the first time in independent India's history that the Bharatiya Janata Party government has used constitutional provisions for opposite ends: to undermine and weaken India's federal character by downgrading a State and territorially dividing it into two Union Territories without the consent of the people of J&K.

The method adopted to execute this decision is of special concern because by equating or replacing the Constituent Assembly of J&K (which was dissolved in 1957) with the Legislative Assembly of J&K, and Parliament appropriating the latter's powers since the State is under President's rule, the Central government has acted unilaterally to reorganise the State of J&K.

This rests not only on legally shaky ground but also flies in the face of constitutional norms and propriety. If this passes judicial scrutiny, it can then be done to any State in India, with drastic implications for its federal character.

The second principle pertains to the maxim of 'inclusivity', that is, a political demand being made must be inclusive in terms of representing the interests of all those in whose name it is made. This supported bridge building



and coalition-making among different communities certainly helped in shaping the peace process, in turn bolstering India's deeply diverse and plural character.

In J&K's context too, it has also proven to be a critical common factor helping to explain the failures and successes of various political demands. The Kashmiri idea of self-determination in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society, for instance, was to call for a plebiscite as mandated by the UN resolutions of 1949 or seek an independent and sovereign State of J&K, but this was not the approach taken by other communities such as the Dogras, Kashmiri Pandits, Gujjars, Bakkarwals, and Ladakhi Buddhists. In the 1950s, as indeed in the 1990s, the demand by Kashmiri Muslims for a right to self-determination or azadi was politically checkmated by these communities as their political choices were very different; time and again, an exclusively Valley-focussed approach has doomed the prospects of the peace process.

Demographic impact

The BJP government's move has, however, not only completely swung the pendulum but is also antithetical to the very idea of inclusivity. By turning J&K, especially the Valley, into a virtually open air prison, with a full clampdown and information blackout, the message is clear: that New Delhi alone will decide the political future of the people of J&K with no

room for any consultative process and no space for dissent.

The decision to divide the State is particularly fraught with the risk of deepening regional and communal fault lines. While Ladakhi Buddhists, for instance, are now celebrating the fulfilment of their long pending demand for Union Territory's status, the voices of Kargilis who are still under a strict curfew are yet to be heard. They may not support this decision because 'a Union Territory without a legislature' not only negates the idea of decentralisation of power to the grassroots (the undergirding principle of the autonomous hill council) but could well lead to a shifting of the loci of power to Leh, resulting in losing whatever gains they have assiduously made over the years.

The celebrations by Kashmiri Pandits are anticipated because of the gross injustice and displacement they have suffered since their forced exodus from the Valley in the early 1990s. It remains to be seen whether the abrogation of Article 370 by itself, would facilitate their return to the Valley without the support of local Kashmiri Muslims and rising violence.

Instead of making all communities equal stakeholders in the peace process, the BJP government's decision may well end up pitching one community against the other. A deepening of societal fissures and communal fault lines do not go hand in hand with the agenda of peace-making.

The third principle refers to a promise and the practices of holding a dialogue process and sharing political power with opponents of all hues. In Kashmir, successive Central governments have until now never shut the door of dialogue in the face of political opponents who have ranged from the Sheikh Abdullah-led Plebiscite Front in the 1960s to the Muslim United Front in the 1980s to the Hurriyat leadership since the 1990s. This also holds true for militant groups.

While the bottomline of Congress governments has been a commitment by their opponents to abjure the path of violence and abide by the Indian Constitution, the erstwhile Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime was even more generous in offering the broad framework of 'insaniyat, jamhooriyat and Kashmiriyat'.

Political fallout

In a significant point of departure, the present government is pursuing a hard, top-down approach. The Home Minister has categorically ruled out any dialogue with militants and the Hurriyat, and has even castigated the mainstream regional political leadership of the National Conference and Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party for being corrupt, promoting family rule and fomenting separatism and violence. This move has nullified the very idea of a process of dialogue and runs the risk of discrediting the mainstream politicians and obliterating the middle ground between the militants and mainstream politicians.

The Prime Minister in his recent address to the nation, expressed hope that new leadership in Kashmir would emerge from grassroots politics. It is important to note that in 1,407 out of 2,135 halqas or village clusters, there was no voting at all in the panchayat elections that were held in 2018. This does not lend credence to youth being optimistic about joining mainstream politics especially after the abrogation of Article 370, a move which is only likely to deepen the alienation. The Modi government faces an uphill task in identifying credible local partners in ushering in peace to the Valley, which may well end up in facing yet another impasse.

Navnita Chadha Behera is the author of 'Demystifying Kashmir' and 'State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh'

Countering the Right's hegemony

In a fightback, only a deep fostering of intra-subaltern solidarity using culture can help



AJAY GUDAVARTHY

India has witnessed the rise of the Hindu Right as not just a political but also a cultural force like never before. The has been made possible by a series of tactical moves which has allowed for a consolidation of power with the traditional castes and classes.

The Right has managed to do this by exploiting and magnifying micro-level social conflicts that lie dormant in order to create a meta-level hierarchy and reinforce the hold of traditional power. It has led to a weakening of the resistance of lower end social groups by fragmenting them and allowing intra-caste, intra-religious and intra-regional differences to articulate themselves in order to delegitimise the resistance and mobility of vulnerable social groups that have so far benefited and accrued some social power. The Right negates the power of such groups in the name of justice and power to those even weaker and further neglected.

In terms of caste, it is now well known that the Right has made significant advances in terms of

breaking up Dalit sub-castes and fully exploiting intra-sub caste tensions and mutual prejudices.

Everyday prejudices

Similarly, it is making advances in mobilising lesser mobilised Other Backward Classes (OBC) groups against dominant OBC groups such as Yadavs and Kurmis. It is further sharpening the conflict between OBCs and Dalits. Added to all this is allowing the dominant Rajput caste to vent its angst against the mobility Dalits have accrued so far: by allowing street violence and mob lynching of Dalits. It is reinforcing social power of dominant castes at one end and fragmenting this through a mobilisation of lesser mobilised sub-castes of subaltern castes. It is sharpening dormant prejudices that have existed for a long time between subaltern castes, caste and religion, and religion and region.

Similarly, the relation between Dalits and OBCs has been fraught with mutual suspicion and dislike, in spite of four decades of 'Bahujan' identity having been mobilised, mostly in the north. In fact, B.R. Ambedkar himself identified the OBCs as 'savarnas' and sometimes equates them with Aryans. This again collates in complex ways with regional dynamics between the north and the south. What the location of the OBCs is in this complex matrix is not very



clear historically; politically the kind of mobility they have got after the implementation of the Mandal Commission has only sharpened the differences. Violent attacks against Dalits by the OBCs are a continuous, if less discussed aspect of Indian politics. The Khairlanji incident was the most recent attack against Dalits by the Kunbis who are listed as OBCs in Maharashtra.

Within the minority religion too, which includes Muslims, there are castes, sects and other differentiations. For instance, in Kashmir, there are differences between Sunnis and Shias, between Sunnis of the Valley and those in the border areas of Poonch and Rajouri, and those living in Ladakh. They neither inter-marry nor do they enjoy amicable relations. Class and regional prejudices overlap with that of sect and caste.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-led hegemony is not a top-

down machination even if there is fear, intimidation, control of media and destabilisation of institutions. The current dispensation is bringing into the open all the cultural contradictions that existed historically. While the Congress's inclusive nationalism attempted to accommodate social groups politically without overcoming social prejudices, the BJP's muscular nationalism lies in including them politically but dividing them socially. The divisions existed; the Right is only widening them.

A new multitude

The fight against the Right is only focusing on critiquing its strategies and exposing it without offering a positive fight to construct an intra-subaltern solidarity. There needs to be a robust cultural programme of fighting prejudices, encouraging inter-dining and inter-marriages. Not mere tolerance but positive celebration of cultural differences is required. Whether or not the Right can be made to retreat depends on this deep cultural programme. We are not clear how one should go about it. This may have to happen as more of a cultural than a political fight. It has to be about humanity, not power; it has to be more about everyday realities than about a programmatic idea of justice.

Every move towards solidarity is also perceived as lowering the

status of groups that are higher-up in the ladder-like structure even if they are simultaneously victimised by dominant groups. Sub-division of Dalits is viewed as a pulling down of the relatively well-to-do castes within Dalits; a sub-division of OBCs is seen as a mode of allowing for the domination of traditional caste Hindus. Gandhi attempted 'change without conflict'; he failed to usher in faster change but offered a semblance of burying conflict. Today, we are witnessing conflict and change itself is suspended between mobility and reinforcing traditional hierarchies. Mere critiquing and electoral defeat of the Right is not going to work.

Castes, religious groups and regional identities should fight it up-front by overcoming the prejudice within. To truly fight the Right, relatively dominant social groups must be prepared to lose a bit of social power they wield, however small it may be. It would also mean being critical of one's own social location, however oppressed it may be. Is this realistic at the current historical juncture? The Right compulsively requires fear, anxiety and insecurity to block the process. What are the cultural resources on the other side of the political divide?

Ajay Gudavarthy is Associate Professor, Centre for Political Studies, JNU

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Putting back the hood

The situation in Kashmir is not normal (Page 1, "Restrictions return to Valley", August 12). The whole of Kashmir is under arrest. If things were fine, why are the communications systems still blocked? If the people of Kashmir really appreciate the "bold decisions" made by the Central government, there should have been widespread jubilation with the tricolour hoisted on all buildings. You cannot force someone to tag your line, at gunpoint. India and Pakistan cannot redraw the map of Kashmir using ink or bloodshed. Kashmiris have to express a oneness in their hearts and minds.

One is also in agreement with Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the U.K.'s Opposition Labour Party, that the Kashmir issue should be resolved through UN resolutions.

T. ANAND RAJ,
Chennai

■ The abrogation of Article 370 was hailed as a masterstroke by the Central government especially as it was seen to be the long-coveted weapon to combat terrorism. But the possibility that prayers may not be permitted at Jamia Masjid, one of the largest mosques, may hurt religious sentiments. It is one thing to say that law and order will be maintained and quite another to deny citizens the basic right to offer prayers,

especially on an auspicious occasion. Extra deployment of paramilitary forces in places of congregation would have been a better option than imposing a blanket ban. At some stage or the other, the security arrangements will need to be relaxed.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

■ Gagging the fourth estate is akin to derailing democracy. How long is the Central government planning to gag the media and correspondingly the voices of Kashmiris? One can redraw land boundaries but hearts have to be won. There is clearly a fear of mass gatherings and processions, which is the only way to explain why restrictions of all kinds are being

reimposed. The words attributed to Abraham Lincoln come to mind: "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time".

TILAK SUBRAMANIAN V.,
Kunjibettu, Udipi, Karnataka

Water revolution

The sudden burst in monsoon activity has exposed the deep faultlines in India's water management policies. While Chennai remains parched, large parts of east and south India are reeling under floods. The erratic nature of the monsoon rains, overexploitation of groundwater and cropping patterns of agriculture should lead to a radical

change in India's water management methods. There has to be a water revolution which lays stress on reuse of waste water, setting up farmponds and making scientifically done rainwater harvesting mandatory. Adapting water

conservation techniques such as drip irrigation technology from Israel can also help make India water secure.

V.S. SINDHURI,
Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the "From the Archives" column (OpEd page, Aug. 12, 2019), the entry corresponding to a hundred years ago should have said August 12, 1919.

In "The forms of federalism in India" (FAQ page, Aug. 11, 2019), a sentence that read "Despite being a single administrative unit, the Union Territory is 'non-contiguous'." That is, its territory is limited to one extent of land" should be amended to say not limited to one extent of land.

In the Sunday Magazine piece "Nemat Sadat: Gay, Muslim, Afghan, immigrant" (In conversation, Literary Review, Aug. 4, 2019) the reference to Nemat Sadat's growing up in South Carolina should be corrected to read as southern California. Elsewhere in the same piece, a quote attributed to him as saying that he had to prove himself as a Muslim should be corrected to read as an ex-Muslim.

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