**Political Leadership in India**

V M Sirsikar

The central leadership after Pandit Nehru represents a new trend towards collectivism and better co-ordination between the parliamentary and organisational wings of the Congress.

The State Chief Ministers played an important role in the succession battle; their importance in national politics is likely to grow in the years to come. This development reflects the growing strength of the different regions of the country.

The central leadership will also be more responsive to popular pressure than hitherto as the people, who tolerated the lapses of Pandit Nehru, would be now more exacting in their demands. Within the Congress Party itself, the rank and file are likely to become more articulate and critical, leading to a greater demoralisation of the party-machine than obtains now.

The opposition parties may increase their pressure on the leadership through alliances or mergers. The same could be said about other organised interests and their efforts to influence Government policy.

**Crisis of Leadership**

It is common place to say that India faces a crisis of leadership. The shortage of leadership is a result of the absence of social conditions and arrangements which would promote potential leaders. Thus it becomes urgent to think of the processes, problems and influences that shape the emergence of new leaders.

Leadership is a phenomenon which pervades every human associational activity, but it assumes a certain crucial significance in an emergent democracy which boasts of the largest electorate in the world and also desires to modernise in a short period of time. The very future of this vast experiment depends on the continuous and steady flow of leaders who can be depended upon for the task of 'attending to the arrangements of the society'.

**Period of National Leadership**

It is not an easy task to survey the developing leadership situation in a country like India, with vast population and cultural variations, in a few pages. Certain obvious limitations are there. What is attempted here is to view the leadership situation in the post-1947 period within its social setting.

It can be stated that the urge for national freedom, unity and the sublimating influence of the non-violent struggle against the imperial power, resulted in throwing up a 'national' leadership, neither interested in sectional, regional or group interests nor in personal advancement. On the other hand, it could be demonstrated that there was a certain social pressure on the leadership to be 'national' in its outlook. No one could hope to be a 'national' leader and still strive for his sectional interests. Their identification with the abstract entity of the Indian nation was complete. The function of this 'national' leadership was to sublimate the parochial caste, communal and narrow regional loyalties into a broad stream of national loyalties for the freedom struggle.

The participation in the freedom struggle demanded from the leaders a certain amount of voluntary sacrifice of their personal careers, properties and even family life. Under Gandhiji's influence they had to live an ascetic life of self-imposed poverty and denial of worldly pleasures. All this resulted in making the leaders very much goal-oriented, and the service (of the people) motive became the dominant note. With the general sentiment in favour of renunciation of power, the power motive could not be much in evidence. Or it could be argued that the power instinct remained suppressed till 1947. It may even be pointed out that in that period, acceptance of a political career automatically divorced the person in question from the sources of wealth-getting. Austerity was thus in part, the consequence of lack of such opportunities.

**Two Traditions**

There is no doubt that there is a tradition of renunciation in Indian culture. However, this does not constitute a massive factor in any field of
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national activity today. In the pre-independence period, achievements in politics, education or any other national activity were possible only on a sacrifice basis and hence the national movement threw up men, organizations and traditions of this type. The sacrifice tradition meant lack of specialized knowledge but the material costs were less and there was an unflinching pursuit of ideals with a zeal. With independence there has been a catalytic change in the psychology of the leaders, though the psychology of the people is still to some extent glued to the pre-independence traditions. This fact explains the wide gap in the expectations from, and the fulfillment of these by the leaders.

It can be argued that in the Indian leadership there are mainly two traditions — the Congress and the non-Congress. The Congress tradition continued in that party and the Socialist parties, while the non-Congress tradition is to be found in the C P I and the rightist parties like the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra. The common factor about the non-Congress tradition was that this leadership was mostly away from the national struggle. (A few of the leaders of the Swatantra party were veteran Congressmen and hence the statement does not apply to these individuals, who, however, do not represent the bulk of the Swatantra leadership. The same may be true of those nationalist communists who participated in some of the national movement). This fact to some extent influences the relationship of the opposition parties to the Congress. The desertsions from and to the Congress are again mostly from and to the Socialist parties. The C P I and the Jan Sangh have succeeded in creating a greater doctrinal and party-loyalty amongst their respective followers.

Well-Trained Team

Today it can be rightly said that India was fortunate enough to have at the start, a well-trained team of leaders under the able stewardship of Pandit Nehru. The role of Mahatma Gandhi as the friend, philosopher and guide of this team came to an abrupt end with his assassination in 1948. The sudden removal of the charismatic father-figure from the national scene, though much lamented, was in a sense instrumental in projecting Pandit Nehru as the new father-figure. Pandit Nehru had acquired a world personality even before independence. This fact together with his aristocratic origins, his legendary sacrifice, his revolutionary background and his love for the masses who adored him, contributed to his charismatic hold over the country and its politics.

The 1947 Cabinet contained a few non-Congress and non-party leaders. This had become necessary to give a national character to the cabinet which was mainly composed of Congressmen. The overall picture was that of the Congress monopoly of power throughout the country. The non-Congress elements remained in the government on the sufferance of the Congress leadership. The country was passing through the ordeal of partition, facing the enormous problems created by the massive influx of refugees and the post-war shortages. The leadership at the Centre was able to tide over these difficulties. There were, no doubt, stresses and strains, heart-burnings and whisper-campaigns, charges and counter-charges amongst the top Congress leaders, specially between Maulana Azad and Sardar Vallabhai Patel (K L Panjabi, "The Indomitable Sardar" and Maulana Azad, "India Wins Freedom."). But these did not reach explosive proportions. Credit must be given to Pandit Nehru for reconciling the divergent elements.

Period of Consolidation

This period could be regarded as a period of consolidation in many senses of the term. The integration of States was achieved peacefully (except in case of Kashmir and Hyderabad). There was a realignment of ideological forces in the country. The Congress Socialists left the Congress to set up the Socialist Party in 1948. The initiative for the break came from the Congress which adopted stricter rules for membership which prevented dual membership. The Socialists had no choice. Even before the Congress Socialists, the Communists had been expelled from the Congress. The Gandhians, mainly the Sarvodayaites, claiming to detest the increasing power struggle, left the Congress to undertake non-political constructive work. Vinoba Bhave and the 'Bhoodan' workers could be cited as the examples. Thus the Congress consolidated as an organisation. But in the process it became more conservative and less idealistic than it was before the attainment of independence. This was not unexpected as the Congress was transferring itself from a broad-based national movement into a closely-knit political party. And those who controlled the party-machine — like Sardar Patel, S K Patil and others — were typically conservative in their socio-economic outlook.

Beginning of Nehru Era

The second period coincides roughly with the start of the First Five-Year Plan, the coming into force of the new Constitution, the death of Sardar Patel, the rise of the Jan Sangh, and the beginning of the 'Nehru era'. The emergence of Pandit Nehru as the leader had certain implications for the Government, the party and the people. It was alleged by the critics, that though the country had adopted the 'cabinet' system of government, in practice it was more of a "presidentialist" system. This, however, did not mean that the Cabinet did not meet or transact business. It meant two things. The domination of the Cabinet by the towering personality of the Prime Minister. It also meant that important policy decisions were made outside the Cabinet. There were, no doubt, instances when Cabinet members differed from the Prime Minister and had the courage to challenge him. Some of them even had the courage to leave the Cabinet. But these instances were rare. Pandit Nehru was never primus inter pares; he always remained unus inter pares.

The consequences of this for the party were extremely important. Before independence, the President, and the Working Committee decided the main policies. But the situation radically changed after the Congress had assumed power and the responsibility of governing the country. Acharya Kripalani resigned his presidency in protest, against the neglect he suffered. All the major decisions were now with the Prime Minister and his Cabinet and the President was not even formally consulted. The exit of Purshottamdas Tandon from the presidentship of the party, a few years later, was with so brazen a display of expediency that it was commented on by the press and the public.

The enormous concentration of power in the hands of Pandit Nehru was now complete, with the taking over of the presidentship of the party. He was leader of the House, Chairman of the Planning Commission, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Minister for External Affairs, in addition to being the Prime Min-

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ister. The immediate result of this was the enfeeblement of the party's organisational wing. The 'process of 'de-Patelisation' of the party-machine was in progress. The once mighty, highly coveted office of the presidentship went now abeying. Pandit Nehru continued to hold the twin responsibility of leading the Government and the party. The successors to the party presidency were for all practical purposes, chosen and nominated by him.

A fatal consequence of this process was the reluctance of other leaders in the Government to use their initiative and take risks. S K Patil referred to this when he compared Pandit Nehru to a banyan tree under whose heavy shadow smaller plants did not get a chance to grow. The effect on the people was to encourage them to look upon Pandit Nehru as the infallible leader who would bring them to the promised land. This attitude made them very indulgent towards him.

Socialist Turn

The next phase in the developing leadership situation began with the inclusion of the 'left forces' in the Cabinet. Pandit Nehru's leaning towards the left was tolerated by the rightists in the Congress. But the increasing importance of the leftists, since the Avadi Resolution on the Socialistic pattern of society, and the emphasis in the Second Plan on physical planning was not much to the liking of the rightists. (The influence of Professor Mahalanobis in giving this slant to the Plan was hotly discussed.) This period witnessed the exit from the Congress of a few top conservative leaders like C Rajagopalachariar and K M Munshi who were later instrumental in launching the Swatantra party. The more decisive influence on the leadership situation was, however, the reorganisation of States on linguistic basis. The total effect of this momentous change was to strengthen regionalism, and to encourage local leadership having linguistic and regional homogeneity.

With the linguistic States the leadership became more rural in composition than in the composite States. The identification of this leadership was with more concrete realities like the caste or the linguistic group. This was an important change as it meant that gradually the urban-centred leadership of the highly educated high caste elites would be displaced by the 'new leaders'. These leaders have a stronger mass-base than those of the earlier period. The 'new leaders', it is claimed, belong to the 'new middle class,—the representatives of the newly-educated, rich, middle castes, mainly of the peasant stock coming from rural areas. There is evidence available to prove that many of the leaders are heavily dependent on the support of the particular caste/clan dominant in their constituency.

Power Shifts to the States

The pendulum of power started shifting from Delhi to the States in this period. The Chief Ministers began asserting their independence. This tendency gathered strength with the decline in the popularity of the central leadership and weakening of the party-organisation.

With the achievement of independence, the 'noble cause' motivation ceased to be decisive. But the elections, the plums of office, the chances of improving one's socio-economic status, attracted the 'new men of power'. Only after independence did politics in Max Weber's phrase, become a vocation in India. Those who wanted to live 'off politics made a significant emergence on the political stage specially at the State and local levels. In contra-distinction to the national, leaders of the earlier period, the political support of the 'new, leaders has certain limiting factors. It has now a distinctive regional colour with the over-tones of caste and a bargaining quality. This bargaining quality emerges because of the growing strength of interest groups in Indian politics, specially at the State level. There are now visible signs of interlinking of business and industrial interests and political leadership, specially of the ruling party. This could be regarded as a new trend. This might be owing to the fact that the political leadership now controls the business and industrial sectors, through licensing, exchange controls, and such other mechanisms.

The last phase of the development of the leadership situation started with the 1962 General Election. The growth of the rightist parties in this election was sufficiently perceptible. This swing to the right in Indian politics might have influenced the Congress itself. The rightists in the party were strengthened. Though the Congress continued to rule at the Centre and in the States, the opposition parties, both of the right and left increased in strength. The Chinese aggression brought about many changes in the internal political situation. It significantly affected the unquestioned supremacy of Pandit Nehru. Within the Congress there was articulate opposition to him—a fact unknown before. The consequences were, the exit of Krishna Menon, perhaps much against Pandit Nehru's wish, and a significant change in Indian foreign policy. Public opinion, specially of the vocal section, asserted itself in this case. The three prestige bye-elections to the Lok Sabha returned Lohia, Acharya Kripalani and Minoo Masani and thus increased qualitatively the combined opposition in the Lok Sabha. This was a further proof of the decline in the Congress prestige—specially the influence of Pandit Nehru. K D Malavia, a close associate of Krishna Menon, and a pronounced leftist, had to resign in the Serajuddin Affair. This was interpreted as a victory of the rightists in the Cabinet.

The debate on 'after Nehru who' in this last phase of Pandit Nehru's life indicated the extreme anxiety felt in the party, in the country and outside about the peaceful succession. It also pointed to the close of the Nehru era—already his charisma was wearing thin, with the Chinese aggression.

The Rise of Kamaraj

This leads us to the present phase which can be conveniently termed as the 'Kamaraj era'. The era began with the 'Kamaraj plan' to revitalise the party by asking senior Congress leaders both from the Centre and the States to step down from the office and devote themselves to party work. Kamaraj, a bachelor, with no family ties, a whole-time politician, with no vices and a simple life, but with innate appreciation of the mechanics of real politics in a democracy, became a symbol of sacrifice and was the first to follow the principle of 'party before post'.

The 'Kamaraj plan, gave an opportunity to Pandit Nehru to drop from his Cabinet six of his colleagues, including pronounced rightists like Moravji Desai and S K Patil. This was alleged to be the attempt to restore ideological balance in the Cabinet, (caused by the exit of Menon and Malavia). The ousting of six Chief Ministers resulted in new power alignments in those States. The plan succeeded because those who were sacrificed, accepted the decision, without recriminious public debate.
There was not even an idea of revolt against the leadership. Events followed in rapid succession with the failing health of the Prime Minister. After the Bhubaneshwar session, Lai Bahadur Shastri, who had resigned under the Kamaraj plan, was recalled to the Cabinet, to share the work of the Prime Minister. Kamaraj emerged as a strong man from the south who had the backing of the southern States and who, unlike his predecessors in office (of presidentship of the party), was determined to use his influence in shaping things after the departure of Pandit Nehru.

Can it be now assumed that the organizational wing would exorcise a co-ordinate authority in the selection of the highest office? Or can it be regarded as merely a resultant of many accidental factors that Kamaraj projected himself beyond his capacity in getting Lai Bahadur Shastri through the ingenuous method of "consensus," and avoiding a direct confrontation? The power of Kamaraj is a result of many factors, principally his unchallenged supremacy in Madras, a state where the secessionist O K and D M K movements were posing a threat to the unity of the country. The strategic importance of the southern States in Indian politics, which the populous northern States dominate by virtue of their voting strength — a fact resented by the south — cannot be overlooked. The support which Kamaraj received was from different sections of the party — some of the party bosses, most of the middle cadre of leadership and the general rank and file. Every one of them might have supported Kamaraj for his own motives and sometimes for contradictory purposes.

Kamaraj, with the help of his supporters, was able to smoothen out the succession issue in favour of Lai Bahadur Shastri. This proved that the lessons he had learnt in the 'real politics' of his region, Tamilnad, were useful on a larger canvass. It is necessary to point out that the much-feared and expected 'split' in the party did not occur. Part of the credit must be given to those who were left out of power.

Conclusions

This brief survey of leadership situation in India does not entitle us to draw any inferences of a general character. What follows is to be regarded as tentative indications about the developing situation.

The age of 'the Children of Revolution' as Pandit Nehru said, is coming to an end. This is but natural, since after 17 years of independence the ranks of the freedom fighters are growing substantially thin. In the earlier phases, jail-going was correlated to remarkable social performance and leadership. This criteria will not now be available. Leadership based on the tradition of sacrifice, dedication and austerity would be replaced by the new leaders who represent their hold on their regions, either due to caste or interest group support. Really speaking the problem of substituting the tradition of sacrifice and dedication, by a tradition of specialisation is the basic issue. Specialisation means more material cost but more specialised knowledge of political organization and administrative skills. But to build up a tradition of specialization demands permeation of appropriate cultural values among the people. As yet no solution has been found. This does not mean that the present Central leadership lacks either in the sacrifice tradition or administrative experience. But if no conscious efforts were made to train a cadre of leaders specialised in political organisation and administrative skills, it would mean that the country would suffer from the demerits of both traditions. With the dedication-sacrifice tradition becoming scarce the material costs would increase, while in the absence of specialisation, there would be less expertise and there would also be a decline in the zealous pursuit of ideals. It is necessary to remedy this situation.

With the passing away of Pandit Nehru the chapter of charismatic leadership seems to have come to a close. The Central leadership at present represents a new trend towards collective leadership and better co-ordination between the two wings of the party — the parliamentary and the organisational. The Chief Ministers were influential in the battle for succession. The role and influence of the State Chief Ministers will be more significant in years to come. This might be regarded as a consequence of the strength of regionalism.

The Central leadership will be more responsive to popular pressure as people who tolerated the lapses of Pandit Nehru would be now more exacting in their demands. Within the party itself, the rank and file would become more critical and articulate. Indirectly, this might be a gain as it would democratise the party-machine.

The opposition parties may increase their pressure on the leadership either through united alliances or mergers. The same could be said about the growth of organised interests and their efforts, open and clandestine, to influence policies.

Pandit Nehru's leadership represented certain values in Indian politics like, secularism, modernism, scientism, socialist planning, non-alignment, and democracy. Though the present leadership could be depended upon to follow these values by and large, yet their emotional commitment to these values is different from that of Pandit Nehru. It is very likely that the internal and foreign policies would be less idealistic and more down to the earth.

The functioning of democratic institutions depends on the internationalisation of democratic values by the community. Though such a claim cannot be made for the whole community it could be said that the leadership, the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy have a workable loyalty to democratic institutions. The smooth transition, contrary to the alarmist fears in certain quarters, from the Nehru era, demonstrates this workable loyalty and its efficacy. Barring an unforeseen catastrophe, the Indian leadership can be trusted to operate the democratic apparatus in a satisfactory manner.

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