

# Indian National Congress: Demagogy, Dynasty, Disunity and Decline

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## Abstract

The Congress, the grand old party of India, plunged into a political abyss after consecutive defeats in the national elections of 2014 and 2019. It called for a deep remedial overhaul, but it resorted to 'Band-Aid political strategies' for pro-tem gains. It recirculated rootless leaders in various party positions, added digital footprints rather than foot soldiers and launched the ambiguous 'Bharat Jodo Yatras' (walkathons) – shepherded by Rahul Gandhi to reclaim its lost political dominance. It becomes contextual to revisit the deinstitutionalization thesis of Congress party and probe criticalities of personalism-dynasticism in top echelons and generational factionalism-leadership conundrums in states in hastening its endemic decline.

## Keywords

Political party system, Indian National Congress, personality cult, dynastic politics, generational factionalism, state leadership

India witnessed the inauguration of the largest democracy in the world after curtains came down on the British Empire in 1947. The Constitution provided a parliamentary model of polity with voters directly electing legislatures at national and provincial levels and party (ies) securing majority-people's mandate forming the government. Indian National Congress (Congress), which played an important role in the freedom movement, dominated electoral politics in the post-colonial era, ruling at both the Centre and majority of provinces until the 1980s. The one-party dominance of Congress ended in the 1990s, but it continued to rule India through multiparty coalitions, which by default activated its auto-decline button and provided ample legroom for the rise of regional parties and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Its downslide gained pace in the start of 21st century, but it slumped to a historic electoral low in 2014 national elections, as it won 44 seats in lower house of

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parliament, ceding its pan India political space to the saffron party and its right-wing allies. The Congress failed to revive in national elections in 2019 as its populist demagogy, futuristic poll promises could not attract new voters and it ended with a nominal increase of parliamentary seats.

The political debacles led to fourth estate investigations about its political graph heading south and 'Save-Congress' became the buzzword of Indian left-liberal academic cohorts. The red flags raised did not stir up the hornet's nest in the Congress and its myopic course corrections failed miserably due to lack of correctional strategies and deep erosion of the party system (Rai, 2023). Its decline at the centre had a decentralized collateral effect-damage, as post-2014, it electorally lost several states to the BJP turning the colour of Indian electoral map saffron. Currently, it is in power without the crutches of like-minded parties in three states of Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana, while in Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand it is the junior partner of the ruling regional parties. In contrast, the BJP and its allies are incumbents in 18 states and union territory of Puducherry. The winning momentum of Congress in Karnataka and media discourse about the reversal of its political fortunes did not hold much water, overshadowed by loss in four out of the five assembly (state) elections in 2023.

Hence, it becomes contextual to analyse its political-situational decline in the conceptual framework of deinstitutionalization of the party with spotlight on the impact of personalism and dynasticism in central leadership as well as generational factionalism and leadership conundrum in provinces. The article comprises two major parts. The *first* section will focus on definitions of political parties and dominant party system and unravel the single-party dominance of Congress between 1952 and 1983. It will evaluate the strength and weakness of the Congress party system that developed after independence and the political impact of the cult leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru–Indira Gandhi on Indian competitive politics. It will delve on the importance of bloodline in Indian electoral politics, advantages and pitfalls of dynasticism in political parties and reasons for its diminishing political returns for the grand old party of India. The *second* part will discuss in detail about the existence of factionalism in parties in democratic countries and the mechanisms to reconcile it judicially and amicably. It will trace the constructive and destructive elements of factionalism in Congress party, intricacies of grievance settlement apparatus in settling intra-party competitions and managing myriad factions, dilution after three decades of effective operationalization and contemporary breakdown. This section will spell out the contours of factionalism and leadership succession and find out the reasons for rampant generational dissidence in the provincial units of Congress, resistance in changing old guards and failure in streamlining leadership conundrums.

## **Personalistic leadership and dynasticism trumped party supremacy**

The literature on political system-parties in democratic countries is quite deep, but the definition of Edmund Burke, one of the finest political thinkers of his time, is the most encompassing and nuanced. He defined it as a body of men united for promoting (by their joint endeavours) the national interest based upon agreed principles. The members believe in their own politics, think them to be of weight and adopt the means to put them into practice. It is the business of speculative philosopher in action to mark the proper ends of Government, find out proper means towards those ends and employ them with effect (Burke, 2002). The other prominent proponents have expounded it as a political group identified by a label, a team of men seeking to control governing apparatus by gaining office through a competitive election. The party system constitutes of two or more parties interacting in patterned ways with some regularities in the distribution of electoral support and

continuity-institutionalization (Downs, 1957; Sartori, 1976). Political parties are products of their societies and discharge functions like structuring vote choice, conducting the government and performing collective actions – socialization, recruitment, communication, interest articulation and aggregation (Almond and Powell, 1978; Epstein, 1967). The parties in India like in other South Asian countries are partially bureaucratic institutions that pro-actively functions in between elections. Their organizational structure revolves around the hierarchical collective leadership that is accountable to the members and they mostly govern by rational and legal authority based on written rules and traditional procedures (Rai, 2023). They mobilize votes based on political ideology and public policies through in-person/digital public campaigns to win elections, run a legitimate government representing the will of the majority and articulating their veritable interests. However, barring two national parties, the Congress and the BJP, most political outfits in the largest democracy of the world are inchoate organic entities in subordination of dynastic leadership, based on parochial agenda-ethnicity and caste identity with localized-regional political dominance. The roots of the modern political party system in India can be traced to the Congress (founded in 1885), which remains the fourth oldest party in the world.

The Congress after independence turned into a ‘Big-Tent Party’, populated with members of diverse ideas and beliefs, as opposed to a fixed ideology, initiating single-party dominance with competing parts playing dissimilar roles. A dominant party system is midway between pluralism and single-party system – operational in India – with opposition parties having a real existence. It brings together numerous important voices that make it closer to a multiparty system (Duverger, 1951). The Congress consisted of a *party of consensus* and *parties of pressure* that functioned on the margin as dissident groups, which were not alternatives of the ruling party, and their role as opposition consisted of constant pressurization, criticism and reprobation. They exerted latent threats of displacing the ruling class if effective public opinion turned very hostile and the internal factional system failed in restoring an equitable balance. There were several opposition parties, but the Congress represented a historical consensus, internalizing political competition and enjoying non-stop support-trust of the common people (Kothari, 1964). But it did not follow the predictable path (three phases) of organizational development: genesis, institutionalization and maturity. The reasons for its skewness and failure to transform from domination to adaptation are several, but prominent factors being dominance-oriented leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, which transcended the normative structure of party efficacy and legitimacy.

Institutionalization in politics involves organizations/procedures acquiring value and stability, with political actors perceiving clear and stable expectations of behaviour of others (Huntington, 1968; Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006). Political democratization and institutionalization is higher if there is a semblance of stability in inter-party competitions, main parties secure societal roots, political actors accord legitimacy to elections and parties escape insubordination by ambitious leaders (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995). Political personalization occurs when the weightage of an individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality and efficacy of party organization witnesses perceptible decline (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). Personalism is a crucial variable in assessing institutionalization of parties and decoding the depersonalization of parties and party competitions (Mény, 1990). The high degree of personalistic dominance of Nehru and Indira Gandhi affected voting choices of the Indian electorate, as they started preferring candidates based on personal attributes over party ideology-programmes. As a result, institutionalization of the Congress and its deep roots in Indian society revealed signs of weakening, fluidity in party competitiveness and space for rise of personality cult politicians. The cult of personality refers to an idealized, godlike and public image of a person, consciously molded by incessant media exposure and propaganda (Wright and Lauer, 2013). Nehru succeeded in establishing a judicially calibrated supremacy over the Congress, but his dominant personality fuelled the meltdown of

democratic hierarchies and organizational virtues. It gained strength, but higher concentration of power in the hands of Nehru and his deep belief that he alone could hold-unite the beleaguered country debilitated the party's in-built resilience in long run (Kothari, 1964). His larger-than-life leadership created insecurities and nervousness among powerful cabinet ministers, which led to formation of groups/syndicates that diminished the brand value of Congress, better known for shared vision, firm leadership and internalized democracy.

If Nehru pulverized Congress system, the authoritarian rule of Indira Gandhi deinstitutionalized party structure, loosened its political-societal roots and strengthened the personalistic linkages between the voters and candidates. She turned Congress in the 1970s into an organization directed from the prime minister's office, took personal control of party affairs, rather than using the model of Nehru for conflicts resolution at lower-localized levels. She selected chief ministers and state cabinets in close consultation with a clique of personal advisors (Brass, 1995). Indira Gandhi's populist rhetoric initially consolidated the electoral support base, but her autarchic control of Congress quickly seriously undermined organizational efficacy (Candland, 1997). The Congress-dominated party system could not achieve critical mass of institutionalization due to personal aspirations of its top leadership and it failed in structuring-formalizing the political process. The party led by Nehru and other stalwarts immensely benefitted from political inheritance of freeing India from colonial rule, but it created a duality of paradox in organizational progress, as its functioning like a 'movement' weakened its democratization process and increased existential vulnerabilities (Rai, 2023). Deinstitutionalization develops irregularity in the party competition, disrupts party and citizen linkages, principal actors question its legitimacy and the party is under subjugation of strong leader (s). The Congress lost its primacy position in the battle of public perception among the political parties primarily due to dilution of democratic ideology, non-compliance of party rules and the overpowering tendencies of its supreme leaders.

If larger-than-life personas of Nehru and Indira Gandhi enfeebled party system in early years, then dynastification of Nehru-Gandhi family after succession of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime minister in 1984 turned it into a quasi-hereditary-cocoon (privileged establishment), creating a distance between elites and party members. A political dynasty means a 'family that successfully retained political power by maintaining control over one elective position for more than one-successive generations' (Albert et al., 2015). It symbolizes a person stepping into the shoes of a family member and holding a constitutional or democratically elected post, but in the Indian context, it extends to intergenerational-elected leadership positions in political parties. Political dynasties are primarily trust networks based on reciprocity and centred around a politically adapt player (Ruud and Nielsen, 2018). The networks possess substantive autonomous power, acutely visible during dynastic succession, as at such moments, the dynastic heir is actively seeking to replicate the bloodline. It is a perilous time situation when routine functioning of the dynastic formations is highly prone to disquiet-disruptions. It brings to fore a specific dilemma that political dynasties have to negotiate when they pursue to multiply themselves across generations. The difficult situation requires public projection of the dynastic heirs as extraordinary human beings, with special qualities and extraordinary capacity of the original dynast in changing the world. It needs to invisibilize inherited dynastic ties that make the scion vulnerable to negative public opinion of nepotism-illegitimate privileges (Das et al., 2023). Rajiv Gandhi succeeded in smooth dynastic succession due to strong public opinion in his favour for carrying forward his mother's political legacy. This created a huge sympathy wave for him and the Congress won a benchmark mandate in 1984 national elections, winning 415 of the 543 parliamentary seats in the lower house of the parliament with a whopping 48% vote share. He negotiated the tricky-difficult bloodline succession because of public endorsement and quick legitimization of his leadership in power corridors comprising of political leaders, corporate and social activists. However, this upsurge was an aberration, as in

Decimating erosion of congress support base.

| Year: national election                                     | Total: parliamentary seats | Seats won | Vote share (%) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| <b>Jawaharlal Nehru–Indira Gandhi</b> (Dominant Leadership) |                            |           |                |
| 1952                                                        | 401                        | 364       | 45.0           |
| 1957                                                        | 403                        | 371       | 47.8           |
| 1962                                                        | 494                        | 361       | 44.7           |
| 1967                                                        | 520                        | 283       | 40.8           |
| 1971                                                        | 518                        | 362       | 43.7           |
| 1977                                                        | 543                        | 154       | 34.5           |
| 1980                                                        | 543                        | 353       | 42.7           |
| <b>Rajiv Gandhi</b> (Dynastic Prime Minister)               |                            |           |                |
| 1984                                                        | 543                        | 415       | 48.1           |
| 1989                                                        | 543                        | 197       | 39.5           |
| 1991                                                        | 543                        | 244       | 36.4           |
| <b>Sonia–Rahul Gandhi</b> (Dynastic Party Presidents)       |                            |           |                |
| 1998                                                        | 543                        | 141       | 25.8           |
| 1999                                                        | 543                        | 114       | 28.3           |
| 2004                                                        | 543                        | 145       | 26.5           |
| 2009                                                        | 543                        | 206       | 28.6           |
| 2014                                                        | 543                        | 44        | 19.5           |
| 2019                                                        | 543                        | 52        | 19.5           |

Source: Election Commission of India.

national elections held later on, the Congress vote share fell below 40% mark vindicating the proposition that over-dominant leadership of his predecessors and dynasticism sequel resulted in its political decline.

After Rajiv Gandhi's death, the baton of Congress apex leadership went outside the first family for some time before his spouse Sonia Gandhi became the party president (1998–2017, 2019–2022). After her exit, the next generation of family took a firm grip on the party, perpetuating dynastic politics. The bloodline access to power is antithetical to democratic principle of right to equal participation in politics, as dynastic elites deter talented non-dynasts a fair opportunity to participate in elections (Ghosh, 2023). Though dynastic inheritance remains a powerful source of strength for the heir, it continues to be illegitimate and does not disappear in 'modern age-but becomes shamefaced' (Das et al., 2023; Dumont, 1980). It leads to unequal distribution of power-imperfect democratic representations and the dynastic control of the party leads to dilution of ideological agenda, social equity, democratic ethos, rational rules and ethical work culture. The democratic functioning of the party gives way to centralized arbitrariness, as a miniscule coterie of political actors create an echo chamber for the charismatic leader-distance from others and divorced from actual public opinion.

Dynastic pedigree is a contradiction with both liabilities and dividends, but it is in this duality that their popularity is routinely measured and decisions made about their fate. They often win elections, but the electorate develops qualms about aspiring dynasts and non-dynastic political class questioning their political legitimacy. In a world where rhetorical commitment to the principles of democracy is the norm, dynasty is problematic, as political rhetoric often links dynasticism in India to nepotism and ill-deserved privilege (Das et al., 2023). If a dynastic heir does not carry the family charisma or organic leadership aura, it can lead to self-decimating factionalism and

disintegration, as is happening with the party with hand election symbol in India. It is facing a substantial electoral decline since 2014, losing 6% support of the electorate since Sonia Gandhi helmed the party. The reasons for terminal decline of Congress are several, but it could be primarily due to failed election enterprises of their apparent-Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, but despite this shortcoming, their authority on party is rock solid, which provides amnesty from performance appraisal-personal accountability. There have been muted voices of constructive dissent from alienated middle-rung leaders, but it could not seriously challenge their dynastic entitlements (Ghosh, 2023; Ramachandran, 2019). Though being out of power for more than a decade, the Gandhi scions are immune from political vulnerabilities due to safe encirclement by loyalists, enjoy left over political influence-resources and feel a close connection with power (Guha, 2012). The unsaid reservation of top leadership post in Congress for dynastic ascension impedes the natural growth of second tier or grassroots state leaders, as it provides an unequal access. The dynastic conservation labyrinth in Congress makes it improbable for a son of a soil leader to either lead the party with free will or become prime minister. Bloodline leadership of parties is acceptable until it keeps bringing it to power, but it turns into a liability if it repeatedly fails in winning electoral competitions and adding political capital.

### **Generational factionalism and provincial leadership conundrums**

Factionalism in a political party is intra-party combination or clique grouping organized to act collectively with members sharing a sense of common identity and purpose. It is a distinct bloc with the aim of achieving their pre-determined goals (Zariski, 1960). The factions are a relatively organized group that exists in the context of other group and politically competes with rivals for power advantages, a form of conflict organization that reflects the tendency of intra-party actors to act in unison for attaining common goals (Beller and Belloni, 1978; Maor, 1997). Factionalism-intra-party contestations is common in political parties worldwide, but it becomes detrimental to organizational-political efficacy if competing factions develop crab mentality and debilitating infighting prowess over a period of time.

The Congress in 1947 internalized political competition by developing an elaborate multi-level system of factions in political and governmental activity, and a system of coordination between various strata through vertical 'faction chains'. The individual competition between leaders gave birth to factions-functional networks of social groupings based on leader-client relationships. As a result, patronage networks developed in rural areas, which involved traditional kin and caste institutions and creation of structure of pressures and compromises. Apart from it, two new tiers of cadres mediated these networks, managerial class of politicians in provinces and district party units, and a class of 'link men' in the field. There was operational conciliation machinery in the party (every level) for mediating-resolving factional disputes, interfering in outcome of conflicts and propensity to avoid express conflicts. This led to an extensive network of myriad buffers in form of executive committees, informal consultative committees and 'inner groups' in leadership hierarchies (Kothari, 1964). The system of mediation and arbitration in the Congress along with inter-level coordination ensured active involvement of central leadership in factional structure. Since Nehru had a firm command on the party organization, it facilitated settling of factional conflicts (Candland, 1997). Its evaluation based on strength-weaknesses of electoral positioning and cohesion index reveals that the biggest threat did not arise from ideological differences, but from divisive mindset-tendencies. The appetite for political status and recognition was the most powerful driver, more than caste, communal and provincial impulses in Indian political parties. It formed the basis for splintering of parties and factional rivalries (Weiner, 1954). The prime objective of the groupings in Congress was to control access to governmental positions, each pegging on chances

of emerging a winner and sticking fast to its position, which resulted in the absence of a fruitful dialogue. The rigid, uncompromising postures adopted by rivals forced the top command to seek areas of agreement by bringing them to the negotiation table and adopting informal methods of conflict mediation, reconciliation and arbitration. This strengthened as well as emboldened factionalism in the Congress establishment, but it continued to be manageable and somewhat beneficial for party competitiveness and realization of common goals.

The sub-coalitional stratification had a crucial bearing on conflict resolution-decision-making, as the dominant ruling group managed conflict better than the group facing strong opposition or is in a minority ruling position. The differential influence of the top command over lower echelons is in direct correlation with the nature of factional competition and is a crucial variable in determining the extent of influence and power the top command exerts on lower echelons (Roy, 1967). The integrative functions of factions in Congress included political recruitment, as groups opposed to each other embarked in enrolling new primary members for local organizations to increase its voting strength in organizational elections. The counter-balancing of top command's drive for power by vocalist's urge for autonomy and initiative is a crucial function performed by factions, which channelled conflict-hostility within the party without endangering its stability. However, factionalism became disruptive when rival groups discarded traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution and started relying more on mediation by impartial arbitrators. The number of such arbiters decreased in Congress as factions started performing human resources function of hiring for the party (Brass, 1964). The oppositional and socialist movement in Hindi heartland states played a crucial role in awakening the social-political consciousness of people, spurring the rise of grassroots leadership from the lower half of Indian society. The petering away of freedom legacy and nationalist capital led to diffusion of Congress ideology and fading of perceived dominance image. It suffered several splits and witnessed attrition of party members, which cumulatively led to steady erosion of the formidable party system. The emergence-consolidation of alternatives to Congress in different states and inconsistent replacements revealed regionalized patterns, but it did not give birth to an all India party. The verdicts of national elections of 1989, 1996, 1998 and 1999 demonstrated an opaque manifestation of fractured polity, as no party obtained a simple majority to form a government on its own numerical strength. The national elections in 1989 brought a democratic shift in the archetype of party politics-electoral representation, as it witnessed the emergence of a third political force (Satyanarayana, 1997). It metamorphosized from one-party dominance to multiparty coalitions, which weakened the Congress system as conciliation mechanisms lost its efficacy in 1990s leading to serious conflicts and factionalism, substantially reducing the Congress footprints in states. It lost its dominance in the coalitional party system as strong leaders broke ranks and founded their own political outfits, which in tandem with the rise of regional parties had a multiplier effect on factionalism and political down-gradation.

The simmering intra-party dissensions was kept in check after Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power in 2004, and remained docile, pacified by ad hocism and temporary improvisations. Its defeat in 2014 national elections reactivated generational factionalism and leadership succession crisis in states, but despite its relentlessness, it scored convincing victories in state elections in Puducherry (2016) and Punjab (2017). The leader succession is change in occupancy of senior positions-in or out of government in political parties, with most conspicuous and consequential are heads of government and party leaders. The modification in senior political positions often accompanies with change in the entire personnel exercising powers of government owing to predictable episodes-elections or unpredictable events-revolutions (Bynander and Hart, 2006). Democratic elections in a narrow sense are succession, as every vote carries with it the chance to reaffirm the existing leader or change in head of government-party leader (Farah et al., 2020). The focus of perceptual theory of leadership survival-generational change is on expectations of

party constituents or indirectly electorate's (they) power to remove an incumbent leader. They compare the current party leader's performance with the memory-benchmark of their immediate predecessor. The successor of a powerful party leader or an iconic person heading the government experiences lower durability, as it is 'hard acts to follow' (Horiuchi et al., 2015). The leadership transitions in the party, particularly at decentralized or local levels is both problematic and complex, as smooth successions can increase the efficacy, legitimacy and stability of the party or a poor handling can put it under tremendous tension and trigger its downfall.

Party leadership successions are largely ad hoc affairs arising due to the incumbent's state of mind, dissatisfaction with the leader's performance in the party or, simply put, internal power struggles. It generally generates uncertainty, agony, and trauma and weakens the public support base of the party. 'Managed transition' is a leadership succession initiated by a party leader in position of power, often in close consultation with the party's ruling elite, seeking to control the timing of the incumbent's exit and identification/selection of a new successor. The chances of 'managed transitions'-incumbent leader stepping down voluntarily and passing the baton of power to a new leader fails as frequently as forced ones (Bynander and Hart, 2006). The successor to a long-serving leader faces problems due to the longevity of predecessor who has a firm and crystallized support base within the party that makes it disadvantageous in challenging and reorganizing long-entrenched party dynamics. The long tenure of a leader creates 'taken for grantedness' among party faithful as it is their leadership style-profile appeal that dominates the party's political memory (Horiuchi et al., 2015). In a managed leadership transition in Punjab, the Congress high command replaced chief minister (CM) Amarinder Singh with a new CM just before provincial polls in 2022. This change of guard backfired as his partisan supporters sabotaged the campaign, which resulted in an electoral rout, a replication of a similar scenario in union territory of Puducherry a year ago. The Congress high commands 'taken for grantedness' of strong regional-grassroot leaders of the Congress and general apathy in dealing with their genuine grievances is one of the major reasons for several of them to desert it for greener pastures and better political future.

A major electoral advancement for the Congress occurred in 2018 as it triumphed in elections in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. It returned to power in MP after 15 years of wilderness, but lost it in just 15 months due to its inability to strike a right generational balance amid the deepening rift between CM Kamal Nath and youth leader, Jyotiraditya Scindia. The Congress failed in handling leadership change judiciously that forced Scindia to defect (with 21 MLAs), engineer the downfall of Congress Government and bring back the saffron party to power. It had a fissiparous impact on the party, as it failed in winning state assembly elections in 2023, exposing its organizational weakness and leadership dilemmas. Similarly, in Chhattisgarh, tussle between CM Bhupesh Baghel and Deputy CM T. S. Singh Deo, while in Rajasthan, CM Ashok Gehlot locked horns with his younger rival-former deputy CM Sachin Pilot. The 'forgive and forget' formula of the Congress central leadership to placate the ruffled feathers in run up to provincial polls in 2023 failed miserably, as the party suffered significant reverses in seats where the marginalized leaders held considerable clout, augmenting a BJP comeback in both the states. A crowded field of CM aspirants in states won recently (Siddaramaiah and D. K. Shivakumar in Karnataka; family of ex-CM Virbhadr Singh, Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu and Mukesh Agnihotri in Himachal Pradesh) led to delays in the formation of governments. The internal bickering in these states refuses to die down, indicating that not all is well. A party needs to be in a position of political strength, and if this is lacking, presence of too many centrifugal forces will encumber even very strong incumbent leaders to control the transition process (Bynander and Hart, 2006). The declining strength and delegitimization of Congress make it difficult to stage smooth leadership successions, as incumbent elites openly face challenges from party factions, particularly those populated with young and aspirational members.

At the national level, the continued hold of the Nehru–Gandhi family ensured that after the retirement of Sonia Gandhi, her children Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi smoothly took charge of the Congress heralding a generational leadership change. Such amicability is clearly lacking at the state level as hostilities in replacing old guards by young promising leaders are compounding the succession problems. The electorate in parliamentary democracies show more tolerance towards younger leaders rather than well-worn members. The perception of young leaders as reformers-skilful in interpreting voters' voices and reflecting them in the policy process is a signal for generational change that often means necessary renewal-fresh leaders for a tired party (Horiuchi et al., 2015). The dejection of senior Congress leaders due to socio-cultural changes in the party like power conflicts, generational resistance and dissonance with younger leaders is severely curtailing its ability to provide further motivational energy for societal changes.

The process of forming aspirations and collective identities among new generation and revision and reformulation is taking place more in cyberspace or framework of grassroots involvement. Hence, it becomes difficult to maintain momentum, put ideals into institutional frameworks and connect with actual structures of power. Institutionalization is necessary for implementation of social change and entails high organizational costs-long-term involvement, which is different from fluid and fragmented forms of youth activism. In such cases, leadership dynamic emerges, but outcomes are transient rather than transformative. The younger generation do not provide any viable alternatives to traditional structures of institutionalized politics to influence political life, but on the contrary are highly confused about existing political systems and uncertain about ways to achieve social change (Zachara, 2019). The uncontained factionalism has damaged the Congress quite often and the increasing rivalry between veterans and emerging leaders in states have made it more prone to further splits, underlining the urgency of circumventing factionalism and resolution to leadership dilemmas. There is no copybook formula for built-in constraints, but an implementable reconciliation mechanism is required for finding harmony and balance in order to improve the party's political prospects and future.

To conclude, parties that historically commanded independence movements in South Asia, often led by first families, paved the way for populist leaders and confessional politics with increased importance to regional issues. It drew proportionately more from the proletarian voters (rural-agricultural), representing the new constituents and aspirations (Candland, 1997). The decline-stagnancy of Congress shows that authoritarian tendencies and organizational decay were not the only primary drivers, but variables like personalism, dynasticism, factionalism, leadership succession and breakdown of conciliation mechanisms carried equal statistical weights. Apart from these determinants, exogenous factors like partisan dealignment, massive erosion of party identification, epistemically polarizing non-inclusive and non-compromising political party system, twin manifestations of globalization social-political modernization, led to steady decline of Congress electoral support base. The party changed its politicking from ideological policy-to-power seeking party that led to 'deinstitutionalization' of the party system and hegemonic control over competitive politics.

The depreciation of its political constituency led to unpredictable politics, lowered the quality of electoral representation, weakened checks and balances on dynastic leadership and provided space for authoritarian decision-making and decline in democratic governability. The grand old party has very short time left to contest the mother of all elections, but it can still pull up its socks by distancing itself from dynastic dilemma-limitations, realign its political and cultural ideology with aspirational India and bring back defected political heavy weights and party cadres. It should shed its big brother attitude and seal a win-win seat sharing deal with its political allies, allot parliamentary tickets to candidates based on merit and social diversity and design a robust conflict management edifice. The ghost of dynasty remains omnipresent, but public presentation of dynast's

personal qualities and playing down of inherited family legacies can neutralize its immense negativity. The adoption of measures outlined may not dispense the Congress enough and more electoral traction to win national elections 2024, but provide a dense political footing to challenge the one-party majoritarian dominance of the BJP.

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