

From a party to a movement

To be politically viable, the Congress must align with social protests outside the fold of electoral calculations



AJAY GUDAVARTHY

The Congress faces an uphill task. After the terrorist attack in Pulwama, it is playing it safe as usual – it has no narrative and is simply buying time for the hysteria to fade out. The party looks confused as to whether it should build on the nationalist narrative that has gained traction or raise procedural issues about India's response that have little appeal on the ground. Why is the Congress hesitant to produce an alternative narrative? Why does it insist on being silent instead of coming up with an emphatic narrative that can counter the ultra-nationalist rhetoric of the Prime Minister?

The Congress's failures

To begin with, the Congress is worried about a Hindu consolidation against any possible critique that it might offer as an alternative narrative to the narrow ethnic nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh combine. This is a somewhat justified concern. For over half a century, the RSS has been doing work in the sociocultural domain that has set the terms of reference for others, while the Congress has done nothing in the cultural domain apart from building a rhetorical and half-hearted campaign for inclusive nationalism without mopping up social consent for it.

Further, the party itself aided and abetted the emerging Hindutva consensus, with former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi acting against the Shah Bano judgment and former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao paving the way for the controversy around the Babri Masjid. By introducing neoliberal reforms, the Congress dismantled the welfare state and the legitimacy of social democracy, while continuing with secularism as a social policy, which sections of the majority Hindu community began to perceive more and more as an appeasement to Muslims rather than as legitimate citizenship benefits.

Without a shared ethos on the ground, 'market fundamentalism'



"The Congress should become the vehicle for mainstreaming various small struggles for basic survival." A farmers' protest in Indore on March 9. •PTI

began to destroy the ideal of a harmonious social fabric of religious and caste groups. The Congress's 'politics of accommodation' took a beating when the Other Backward Classes first moved to regional parties and later to the BJP. In due course, the Congress became more and more dependent on Muslim and Dalit votes to win elections. In this scenario of induced dependence on the minority vote, the Congress began to look more tilted towards the Muslims without actually doing much for the community – it did not, for instance, enact effective policies to counter the kind of backwardness that was noted by the Sachar Committee report.

It is against this backdrop that the phenomenon of Narendra Modi emerged. Mr. Modi and the BJP began to actualise the RSS's vision of a Hindu Rashtra. Mr. Modi built his credibility both by highlighting the failures of the Congress as well as appropriating the liberal-progressive critique of those failures and packaging within that an aggressive majoritarian politics. The appeal of the Hindutva brand of politics is based on consolidating various micro-narratives

to form a metanarrative of 'othering' Muslims. While dynasty became a symbol of old patronage politics, Muslim appeasement began to symbolise the various kinds of exclusions and failures in ensuring inter-generational mobility for Hindu caste groups. Mr. Modi occupied this symbolic space. The credibility and trust he enjoys today is the articulation of the angst of an aspirational new generation, and the anger of traditional caste groups.

Mr. Modi became the TINA (there is no alternative) factor of Indian politics. In spite of failure on the economic front, people are still not prepared to question his intention of *Saaf Niyat, Sahi Vikas* (clean intent, right development). The electorate today has nagging doubts about his competence, but not about his will and intention to do well. Mr. Modi's campaign for the Lok Sabha election is based on this reality on the ground. It affords him a space to contradict himself in his campaign speeches. Ministers and BJP leaders can afford to make claims of what transpired during the air strikes as well as make tall promises because

the electorate continues to trust Mr. Modi and considers him to be beyond doubt and above critical interrogation. And that trust emerges from the Congress party's chequered history. Mr. Modi's campaign style and rhetoric reflect this deep trust that people have invested in him. There may be contradictions in his speeches, but people continue to justify all of this in the name of nation and religion.

What the Congress can do

In this situation, what can the Congress do? It needs to change the terms of reference and the lens through which the electorate today is evaluating things. This is a difficult task but not an impossible one. For this, the Congress needs to go back to being a movement. It needs to closely align with various social protests outside the fold of electoral calculations. It should become the vehicle for mainstreaming various small struggles for basic survival, including the struggles of *safai karamcharis*, Dalits, Adivasis, those displaced by development projects, internal migrants, students, and others. These are unheard voices on the fringes of society, and the Congress should try to make them heard.

Without such deep change in the DNA of the Congress, it will be difficult for the party to be a viable political or electoral alternative. Social consensus has shifted to the right, across castes and classes in India. The RSS has made this possible in a diverse society such as India through its rugged survival in the margins for almost a century. What we are witnessing today are the fruits of that labour. It is through such sustained work that it has captured the public imagination. It has gained the capacity to now set the agenda for popular politics. It has learnt to co-opt all that is hegemonic in the public sphere to package its own exclusivist and authoritarian brand of politics. The Congress needs to get a handle on these micro-aspects to set a more inclusive agenda the way it did during the anti-colonial movement. Its own future depends on whether or not it is able to make this transition in the days to come.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Sources are sacrosanct

The idea of common good binds the source and the reporter



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

What can one make of the contradictory claims by the Attorney General of India? On March 6, he told the Supreme Court that "secret" documents published by *The Hindu* on the purchase of 36 Rafale jets were "stolen" from the Ministry of Defence, probably by former employees. On March 8, he informed the news agency PTI that what he meant in his submission before the Supreme Court was that the petitioners in the application had used "photocopies of the original" papers, deemed secret by the government. While the senior-most legal officer of the country was busy deciding whether the documents were stolen or photocopied, people on social media were attacking journalists for frequently citing unnamed sources in their reports.

Ethical framework

It is important for citizens to understand the legal and ethical framework that guides the relationship between a source and a journalist. The European Court of Human Rights, in *Goodwin v. the United Kingdom*, ruled: "Protection of journalistic sources is one of the basic conditions for press freedom... Without such protection, sources may be deterred from assisting the press in informing the public on matters of public interest. As a result the vital public-watchdog role of the press may be undermined, and the ability of the press to provide accurate and reliable information be adversely affected... An order of source disclosure... cannot be compatible with Article 10 of the Convention unless it is justified by an overriding requirement in the public interest."

Norman Pearlstine's *Off the Record* is a fine book that examines the complex relationship between sources and journalists. Journalists take care not to confuse a whistleblower with a source. There are many unreasonable demands before investigative journalists. A sharp observation by James Risen, senior national security correspondent at *The Intercept* and director of First Look Media's press freedom defence fund, explains the challenges in front of a reporter: "We're

being forced to act like spies, having to learn trade craft and encryption and all the new ways to protect sources. But we are not an intelligence agency. We're not really spies. So, there's going to be a time when you might make a mistake or do something that might not perfectly protect a source. This is really hard work. It's really dangerous for everybody."

I had explored one element of this relationship in an earlier column, "The relationship between journalists and their sources" (September 29, 2014). There are many interlocking factors that not only define the symbiotic relationship and but also spell out the obligations of journalists to their sources. My colleagues at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford have spelled out the ground rules in "The Perugia Principles for Journalists Working with Whistleblowers in the Digital Age".

Publishing the truth

All major investigative stories draw their strength not only from the relentless work of reporters but also from conscientious sources who first alert reporters about the misleading. Daniel Ellsberg's crucial role in releasing the Pentagon Papers is as important as the work of the reporters of *The New York Times* in exposing the U.S. military's role in Vietnam. From internationally known investigations like the Watergate stories, Snowden

files, the thalidomide victims' reports, and the Panama Papers to our own investigations in the Bofors and Rafale cases, brave sources have risked everything to enable reporters to publish the truth.

The first principle of investigative journalism is to protect your sources and defend anonymity when it is requested. James Risen was nearly arrested by the U.S. administration because he refused to identify the source of information contained in his 2006 book, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration*, about a bungled covert CIA operation involving Iran. The relationship between a source, who is willing to risk his or her career, reputation and future for the sake of truth, and a reporter cannot be reduced to a transactional equation. The relationship is built on trust and involves mutual respect. The idea of common good binds the source and the reporter. Hence, their relationship is sacrosanct.

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SINGLE FILE

Losing the information war

The Indian government no longer has viable channels to put across its point of view to the Western media

K.P. NAYAR



India is used to a negative international media. After the 1998 nuclear tests, the American media echoed the lines of Jesse Helms, then Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that "the Indian government has not shot itself in the foot.

Most likely it has shot itself in the head." As events unfolded, its dire predictions turned out to be completely inaccurate.

The difference between then and now, when the global media has cast doubts about India's "non-military and preemptive" response to the Pulwama terrorist attack, is that the Indian version of events is hardly getting a credible hearing. This is because the Indian government no longer has viable channels to put across its point of view to the Western media. By acts of commission and omission, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which should be in the driving seat for such publicity, has, over the last few years, discontinued a practice that might have persuasively argued the Indian position.

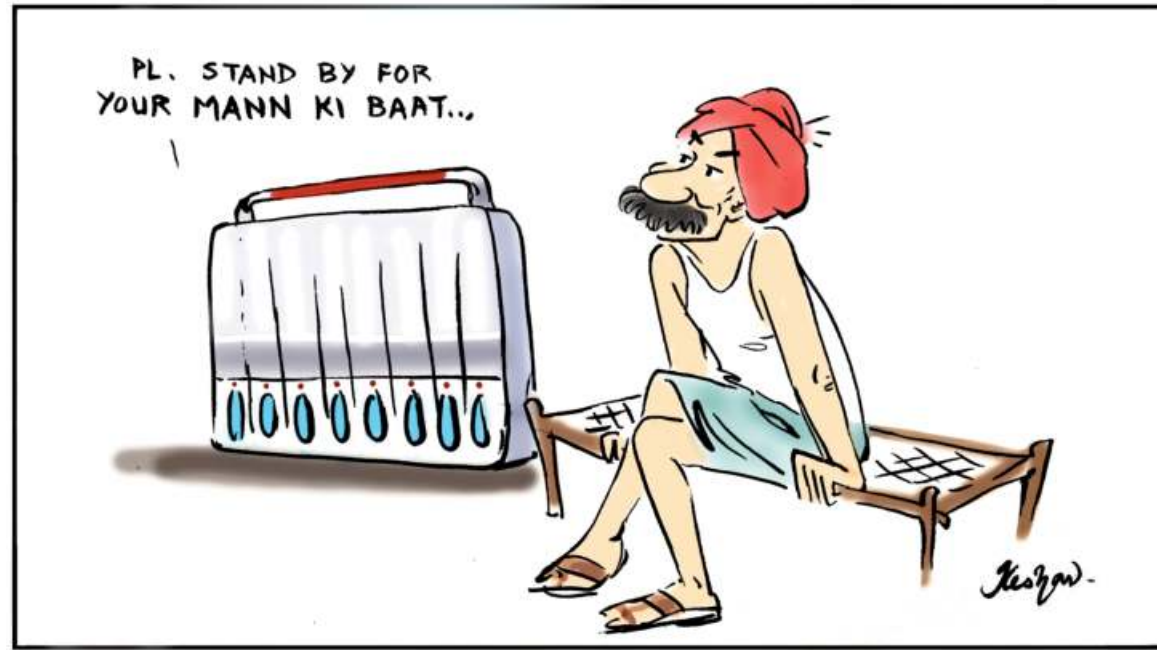
For some time now, foreign correspondents based in India have not been attending briefings by MEA spokespersons. They may have concluded that their time might be better spent on other stories as they tend to cover the entire subcontinent and have enough on their plate.

This was not the case earlier. For many decades, following the daily briefing by the MEA spokesperson, Indian and foreign correspondents would gather at 4.30 p.m. for background banter over tea and samosas. It gave an opportunity for the spokesperson, who was sometimes joined by heads of MEA's territorial divisions, to informally put across what he or she could not say on record about India's stake in diplomatic juggling. Inevitably, some of this would be published in reports.

That did not happen with events post-Pulwama. The daily briefing by the MEA spokesperson seems to have faded in importance. Towards the end of Manmohan Singh's tenure as Prime Minister, the daily briefing was scrapped in favour of weekly briefings. That worked as long as the spokesperson was accessible to foreign correspondents in New Delhi 24x7 or on call. That is no longer the case. In the new millennium, changes were made to the MEA's outreach using new technology, modelled on the U.S. State Department, making it easier to find information.

Such useful content is no longer available on the MEA's information outlets. The brief for spin doctors of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomacy has been to convince the domestic audience that India is a great power. Earlier, the brief was to convince the world that India is an emerging giant in global affairs. With this change in priorities, the government is unable to disseminate information that could have produced a more sympathetic global media on the current play in India-Pakistan relations.

The writer has been a foreign correspondent for nearly three decades



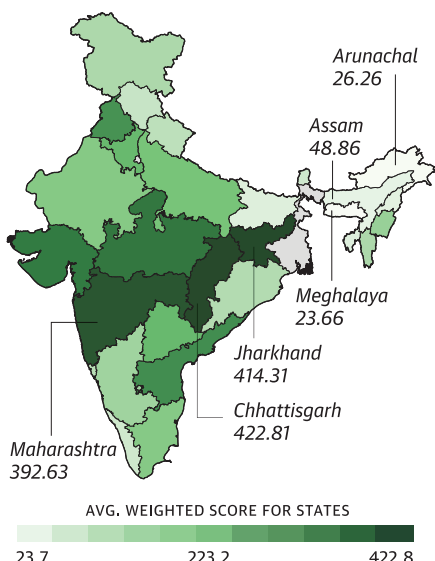
DATA POINT

Grading cleanliness

Urban Local Bodies in Chhattisgarh are the cleanest among all States, according to the Swachh Survekshan 2019 report. Due to poor citizen feedback, some ULBs did not manage a better overall score despite good scores on other parameters. By Varun B. Krishnan

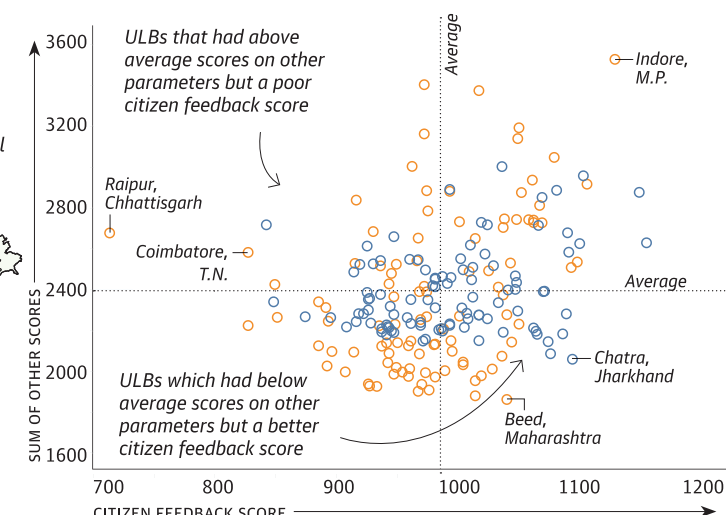
Scoring States

Close to 69% of the ULBs in Chhattisgarh were ranked among the top 500 (out of 4,237). Jharkhand and Maharashtra are the other two States in the top three. States which secured the three lowest scores were in the Northeast. West Bengal opted to not participate in the survey



People factor

Analysis of the top 200 ULBs shows that in some, citizen feedback was a crucial factor in improving or worsening the total score. ULBs marked in blue (o) have a population of less than one lakh people (rest have more than 1 lakh)



Weightage

The scores used to compare States on the map were adjusted for the differential rate of urbanisation. Also, instead of actual scores, relative ranking was used to normalise the analysis metric. On the other hand, the scatter diagram on the right has unweighted scores of the top 200 ULBs

The survey grades each Urban Local Body for a total of 5,000 marks. The scoring system has 4 components, each with 25% weightage

The four components: Service level progress (eg. solid waste management), direct observation, citizen feedback and certifications (eg. ODF certified)

Both the unweighted and weighted scores were released for analysis

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 11, 1969

Desai threatens to quit

Mr. Morarji Desai, Deputy Prime Minister, is reported to have told a meeting of the Executive of the Congress Parliamentary Party here [New Delhi] today [March 10] that if some of the party members were allowed to go on maligning him in public, he might have to think of retirement. Mr. Desai made this statement when there was a brief but heated discussion on some of the remarks made by Mr. Chandra Shekhar in the Rajya Sabha last week during the debate on Birla affairs. Although it was not part of the agenda for the meeting today [March 10], the matter was raised by Mrs. Tarakeshwari Sinha, who had earlier written to the leader of the party drawing attention to some party members singling out certain Ministers for attack while criticising the Government's policies, and urging the need for effective steps to enforce discipline.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 11, 1919.

Sir Rabindranath Tagore on National Education.

Sir Rabindranath Tagore delivered a masterly address on "National Education" last evening in the Gokhale Hall [in Madras on March 10] at 5:30 in a silvery tone which was distinctly heard by one and all of the large audience. The Hall and the galleries were filled to their utmost capacity. Ladies and gentlemen of all classes and creeds were present. The address was listened to with rapt attention. Admission was by tickets... Sir Rabindranath Tagore, in the course of his address, said that the question which he wished to discuss was what should be the ideal of education in India? Upon each race the duty was laid to keep alight its own lamp of the mind as representing its own thought in the illumination of the world. To break the lamp of any people was to deprive it of its rightful place in the world festival. He who had no light was unfortunate enough, but utterly miserable was the man who, having light, had afterwards been deprived of it or forgotten its existence.

CONCEPTUAL

Twin studies

BIOLOGY

This refers to scientific studies conducted on identical twins who share the same set of genes. It is believed that twin studies can be an effective way to answer several questions related to human behaviour, including the influence of genes and environment on the behaviour of individual human beings. Behavioural scientists may employ twin studies to understand the behaviour of identical twins who share the same set of genes but were adopted by different families and thus grew up in significantly different environments. Such twin studies can help scientists to successfully isolate the influence that the environment has on the behaviour of individuals.

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