



# *Policies & Perspectives*



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

## Does the Congress know where to shoot?

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*Over the last three years particularly, the Congress party has been lurching from one electoral defeat to another. Every time the grand old party faced a setback, people believed that it had learnt lessons and that the learning would be put to use in the subsequent poll battle. However, much to the astonishment of the optimists, the Congress seemed to internalise only those lessons that had ensured its earlier debacle, and went ahead to repeat the blunders. The result is that the party is on the verge of being reduced to second or third position in even the fistful of States it currently governs. Besides, it has virtually given up on its prospects in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The Congress clearly does not subscribe to celebrated author Napoleon Hill's belief that "opportunity often comes disguised in the form of misfortune, or temporary defeat". Nor does it seem to follow noted poet Maya Angelou's advice that while we may encounter many defeats, we must not be defeated.*

*It cannot be that the Congress party lacks cerebral material or that it has no history to draw lessons from. It has deep political thinkers and strategists, and it has a record of bouncing back after severe electoral setbacks. And yet, today, it has no stomach for a fight. Perhaps it had never faced an adversary of the sort it does now, or maybe it has lost the narrative. Both of these are together possible. But these are not insurmountable problems. The real obstacle lies in the party's failure to recognise and acknowledge both failure and its cause(s). The Congress has slipped into a denial mode, much like the ostrich which has its head buried in the sand in the hope that the turbulence will pass by on its own. The Congress denies many truths, primary among them being that its central leadership has woefully let down the party. Statements that have emanated from its senior leaders after the defeats put paid to any hope of the party's revival in the immediate future.*

*It's not that the Congress's network of workers, which exists in the remotest corners of the country, has let the party down. To the contrary, it's the top leadership that has failed to energise this cadre. It should not be difficult for a party to question its leadership in a democratic set-up in such circumstances. Belling the cat is a natural, the normal thing to do. But when the leadership rests with a dynasty that has steered the party since independence, and which has over the decades propagated the belief that it alone can keep the party united in times of crises and set it back on the path to glory, the difficulty of challenging the perception is not easily tackled. Indeed, many well-wishers of the party, senior enough in their own right and experienced to the core, throw in the towel without a fight. Most of them prefer a diplomatic silence and others dish out pedantic explanations which are really lame excuses. But there is a section that dares to — if 'dare' can be used here, it has to be in the negative sense only — not just downplay successive defeats but also absolve the leadership. It's not the shallowness of reasoning that shocks; the very absence of reasoning as we understand the word, does. It's the bankruptcy of ideas that threatens the party's future.*



*Writing in The Indian Express after the electorate handed out a resounding snub to the Congress in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election, where the party won just seven seats out of the 100 odd it had contested in collaboration with the Samajwadi Party, senior party leader and admittedly among the most articulate, Salman Khurshid, demonstrated his acumen at obfuscation — though his feat did little to camouflage the truth. He began by slipping in a line to build a background for the drubbing, by saying that “we were not exactly in command over the past two decades, although Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi’s strenuous efforts during the Kisan Yatra gave us hopes of a modest revival”. To be argumentative, neither had the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) been in command during that very same period Khurshid speaks about. (Though the party did miraculously well in the 2014 Lok Sabha poll in the State, it was widely believed that the Assembly election was a different game.)*

*Moreover, the Samajwadi Party was very much in command for the last five years, and the Bahujan Samaj Party had been in command in the five years preceding the Samajwadi Party rule — and thus it was during the past two decades and more, both the SP and the BSP were in commanding positions, and yet they lost the 2017 Assembly election. Clearly, therefore, Khurshid’s defence of not being in command is weak and betrays a lack of honest self-appraisal. As for Rahul Gandhi’s “strenuous” efforts during the Kisan Yatra which had raised the Congress’s hopes, it was clear even as the trip was on, that it was turning into an amateurish act. This was largely because nobody seemed to buy into the Congress vice president’s contentions.*

*Khurshid yet again betrays a deliberate attempt to skirt the inconvenient subject of a failed leadership, when he insists in the article that the electronic media’s “taunts” would not force those like him to accept the proposition that the party was ill-served by its senior leaders (read Rahul Gandhi). Given the decades of servility to a particular family, Congressmen and women may indeed find it easier to attempt scaling Mount Everest than to question the party vice president. There were many senior leaders who had developed the spine to question PV Narasimha Rao as party president, for no good reason other than that he had refused to part with the position in favour of a Nehru-Gandhi family member while also simultaneously being the country’s Prime Minister. And yet he had done nothing particularly disastrous for the party or the country. For Khurshid, asking for accountability from its senior-most leadership is akin to sinking in “self-esteem”. This is not just being supine but also bereft of qualities that are needed for the fallen to get up again and run. The former Cabinet Minister in Manmohan Singh’s Government accepted that the party had work to do, but added the rider that it would use its “own script” and not the one “written by the media”. In the first place, the media had turned script-writer after the people had ground the Congress to dust; the media had not defeated the party. The script-writers of the debacle resided within the party itself — at the very top. And second, in re-affirming faith in a trodden script that had resulted in one disaster after the other, isn’t Khurshid simply doing what the critics and even many of the party’s sympathisers are saying: Refusing to see the writing on the wall?*



*The Congress's tragedy is that even articulate thinkers in its ranks, such as Khurshid, have taken refuge in discredited narratives, rejected over and over again by the public. It exemplifies the schism between the ground reality and the make-believe world Congress leaders live in. When they are shown the mirror, they spurn the image. They then proceed to concoct imaginary conflicts of ideas: The good versus the bad — with the good, needless to add, being represented by the Congress. It simply doesn't strike them that this little game of theirs has lost the charm it once had. The nation has moved on but today's Congress is rooted to a past that nobody has time for. Thus, when Khurshid writes that the "battle is not between Narendra Modi and the Rest but between two ideas of India: Exclusive versus Inclusive", he draws at best — and that too out of respect — a few guffaws. If Modi represents what one would assume from the Congress leader's slight as 'exclusive', then he must go a step ahead and accept that the majority of Indians have mandated for 'exclusivity'. Yet, he wouldn't say so, nor can he because he would be as wrong in the presumption as he has been on other matters regarding his party's poor run. If Uttar Pradesh is taken as an example, are we to believe that 325 of the 403 constituencies have voted against inclusivity? How on earth can a party with its allies win a three-fourth majority by excluding large sections of the population? In any case, the Idea of India itself has taken a different form, with the full support of more and more Indians. It's an India that believes in inclusivity minus appeasement. Nothing can stop the Congress from absorbing this idea, except its vanity that derives from the past, and perhaps its inability to let go of an old habit.*

*But it would be a trifle unfair to be this harsh on Khurshid, though his defence of the party's repeated defeats could have done with some empirical understanding. It would be unfair because he was merely resonating his party's de facto suprema, Rahul Gandhi's in-your-face denial. Even the Congress was in a state of shock at the scale of humiliation in Uttar Pradesh, its vice president opined that the party was "a little down" in the State. This should go down as the understatement of the year, and quite hilarious too, except that there is nothing for the Congress to laugh about. It could not win even with the SP's support here; and it could not win on its own or form a Government in alliance elsewhere.*

*Perhaps Rahul Gandhi has heard of Bill Watterson. The American cartoonist, whose comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, is widely read, once remarked, "It's not denial. I'm just selective about the reality I accept." The Congress vice president has been remarkably selective. He cites 'wins' in Manipur and Goa, but refuses to accept the party's failure in forming Governments there despite the Congress emerging as the single largest party in both those States. His accusation of the BJP "stealing the mandate", which was gleefully latched on to by various party leaders as a drowning man would clutch at straws, is one more reflection of the Congress leadership's refusal to face the truth. Nothing had, after all, prevented the party from stitching partnerships in the wake of a hung House. That it could not, allowing the BJP to steal a march over it — and not steal a mandate — points to a deep flaw in the Congress party's strategising at the highest level.*



*The Congress needs to get out of the Don Quixote mindset. For that, it must first identify the real challenges and not go after the windmills in the romantic belief that they are the foes and need to be subdued. However, this is easier said than done for a party and leadership which have consistently relied on dated techniques to conquer political rivals. It must give up on cranking up the past — invoking leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, not because they don't deserve mention. Their stature remains high in history, just as their drawbacks do. The reason lies elsewhere: The new India is uncomfortable with the idea of dynasty. And yet, it would not mind giving dynastic leaders a chance on merit, if there is merit. Sentimentality attached hitherto to family rule has all but faded. The Nehru-Gandhi charm has not worked since 2014 — credit for the party's sole genuine victory so far in the year, in the Punjab Assembly election, goes to Captain Amarinder Singh and not to the Congress's First Family.*

*The second thing the Congress has to do, and urgently, is to construct a narrative that is at once dazzling and credible. The politics of dole under the garb of socialism, appeasement of certain sections and demonisation of rivals (principally the BJP and Prime Minister Modi) have been tried, and have failed. There is no sense in the Congress continuing to do the same thing and yet expect different results. Senior Congress leader P Chidambaram, not ever counted as a Modi admirer, was compelled to acknowledge recently that Modi was the tallest leader the nation today has. Historian and author Ramachandra Guha, a fierce Modi critic, too has accepted that the Prime Minister is right there in the league of Nehru and Indira Gandhi as the biggest leaders India has produced. Author, commentator and social activist Aakar Patel, another Modi opponent, too has grudgingly admitted to the present Congress leadership being no match for Modi. The last real slogan which the Congress had was Indira Gandhi's 'Garibi hatao'. Modi has had a string of these in a matter of months: 'Sabka saath, sabka vikas'; 'Beti bachao, beti padhao'; 'Make in India'; 'Stand Up India'; and, most recently, in the Jammu & Kashmir context, 'Tourism, not terrorism'. Slogans fuel perceptions, and even a bit of credible action on those slogans enhance credibility.*

*The third has to do with persona. No Congress leader can match the Prime Minister's charisma or his connect with the people. The repeated calls from within the Congress ranks, for Priyanka Gandhi Vadra to join active politics, stems from the hope that she can match Modi's popular appeal. Rahul Gandhi simply does not have the personality which his father or his grandmother had. But this alone ought to not have been an impediment, though admittedly, personal appeal is an advantage in politics. Narasimha Rao, in the famous words of a Congressman, had the "charisma of a dead fish". And yet, he ruled as Prime Minister for his full tenure of five years despite the best efforts of those loyal to the Family to unsettle him. In the process, he brought in economic reforms that became the country's new normal. Rao also broke fresh grounds in international diplomacy, especially in relations with the US and Israel. Rahul Gandhi lacks charisma, but that's the smaller problem. The larger one is that he also lacks credibility in the public eye.*



*Some transformations happen through conscious efforts; others are driven by circumstance. If Manmohan Singh was an 'accidental' Prime Minister, so was Lal Bahadur Shastri. Both benefited from circumstance, and yet their trajectories went different ways. Rahul Gandhi may or may not become the Prime Minister, but here and now he leads the Congress to defeat after defeat. This will not take him far in the direction of prime ministership, but it's still good enough for him to become the party president. Will that change anything for the Congress? After all, everything that he would want to do as party chief, he has had the freedom to do as vice president. John F Kennedy has once remarked: 'Politics is like football. If you see daylight, go through the hole.' The Congress could still have many occasions to see daylight. The question is: Does it even know where to shoot?*

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# About VIF

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