

RAHUL GANDHI LACKS A NARRATIVE

When the main challenger, the Congress, during 2019 is reconciled to the possibility that it would not emerge as the single largest party, it is not nuclear physics to understand that it's almost entirely because it lacks a narrative.

For friendly banter, we would agree that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a not just a miserable failure, but an insidious arrival on the Indian polity. That in itself would be a terrible reality. So? Is the answer, vote for the Congress. The question is: why?

The Congress led by their president Rahul Gandhi has attacked Modi incessantly and seriously. Considering all, the question, is: why should one vote for Rahul Gandhi? Well, Modi IS bad, but WHY the Congress or the Rahul Gandhi?

In these days of TV and TV marketing, even a 30-second commercial on live IPL telecast requires a basic storyboard. We will set aside the effort that goes into camera work, editing, re-recording, among several others. The bottom line is the Congress has spoken nothing about, apart from Modi and the truth is Modi by himself cannot be the storyboard. The reason: a negative campaign does not fetch.

It's not that Rahul Gandhi was silent. From the lynch killings right down to the Balakot strike he was attacking. What he failed and fatefully so is that he could not present an alternate agenda for his people. This is so crucial that several parties have been learning painfully. His articulation of his vision for a more inclusive, secular and toxic-free atmosphere for the country is strangely cliched.

‘Suit-boot ki sarkar’, ‘Gabbar Singh tax’ and ‘Chowkidaar Chor hai’ were well-coined, well received. Today they sound like outdated pop songs by Baba Sehgal and Daler Mehendi. They have no currency even after it forms part of a conversation. So much so, the BJP pasted the Chowkidar slogan back on the Congress’ face by prefixing their Twitter accounts with ‘Chowkidaar’. Right through our fieldwork we have noticed again and again the can safely say that the Rafale scandal has not percolated to the grassroots, let alone forming a connect with the voter.

This was bound to happen given the Congress attitude of behaving like a-passenger-in-a-waiting-room on a railway platform. The workers behave that the voters would come to them inevitably only because they are disillusioned or angry with Modi.

One can only wonder why it failed to coin an enduring slogan or evoke a lasting image on demonetisation, which is the biggest misery heaped on those who do a honest day’s work for a living.

The Peoples Pulse fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana we found that rural distress and minimum support price is the single largest issue among the farmers. This has not been highlighted to the extent necessary. Worse, the UPA-1 decision to waive around Rs 65,000 crores of farmers loans is not recalled. Unemployment, among the biggest failures of the Modi-era, is not projected to be addressed in the next five years, except giving a just a promise that the Congress would stand by its word. The Congress did not play up price rise too.

It was during our fieldwork we spoke to several Congress leaders, candidates and aspirants based on which this article has taken the confidence to open by saying that the Congress is “reconciled” to not being the single largest party. The reason is, other than secularism and inclusiveness there is precious little that separates the two main players. The ten years in power at the Centre they delivered farm loan waiver, RTI, NREGA, among others. But it was being in the Opposition that it could have reinvented and rediscovered itself.

The point is basic sensibility is not asking for the kind of story or screenplay or ‘Sholay’ or ‘Bahubali’. Even a story of a B-grade movie would do.

On the contrary it has been found that Ujjwala, Rs 2,000 cash transfer to farmers and building toilets are being recalled and even referred to as “Modi’s schemes”.

Now the Congress’ so-called flagship programme is NYAY. It’s no secret that it did not evolve from the Congress party nor have their workers been subject to chew into it mentally. It’s just labelled as ‘Rahul Gandhi’s scheme’. The Congress candidates or workers are not mentioning it. The basic reason for this disaster is that the rank and file of the party has not been taken into confidence, so now they don’t identify themselves with it and they don’t own it up.

In several discussions it was apparent that Congress workers are plain unaware of the scheme. Further evidence was Rahul Gandhi sluggishness. After two phases he decided to write personalised letters to 12 million poor households about the benefits of his programme. Other chief ministers over the decades have written such letters well ahead of the elections of their populist schemes. This brings into picture of what the party has done or, more pertinently, has not done in the past five years.

It won 44 in 2014. And it came second in 223. Most importantly, it lost with one lakh votes in 157 constituencies. The biggest damage the flag bearer of secularism in India has done to themselves is that they have not done basic work to regain their combative position in those constituencies. Having said that, the Congress may well win several of those constituencies. But that will not be because of the Congress performance or more importantly because they have an emotional connect with Rahul Gandhi. It will be largely because of the candidate.

The Mahagatbandhan swept Bihar in 2015. The Congress failed to create a momentum. The concept that Opposition alliances were critical were either lost on them or they believed that were they to take the initiative they would lose their position of influence. Three years later the Congress responded with terrific alacrity to stop the BJP in Karnataka in 2018. Soon after the UP by-polls happened that SP and BSP proved how the BJP could be shown its place. Even then the Congress or Rahul Gandhi did not demonstrate the élan to take along the Left or the TMC or both.

In these days of white ball cricket in this movie loving country, the event is reviewed, say at interval. We had that moment after the halfway mark. In February 2018 Modi infamously claimed that pakoda selling too is a form of employment. The NSUI and Youth Congress, which were to be revitalised by Rahul Gandhi much before he became the party vice-president, behaved as if the Prime Minister did not say anything. There was no protest to recall nor a nationwide event, say pakoda distribution at bus-stops and railway stations, to highlight the youth's angst.



PEOPLES PULSE
an ear to the ground

The Congress should be fearful if, over the next few days, the odds favour some regional front which they have to carry on their shoulders. It might be like 1996 or 1998, when those last happened, but now the Congress might be compelled to give some guarantee that the government lasts the term. That is a price to pay.
