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ABSTRACT

In these last several weeks that have followed the election victories of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the party is suffused with a new political energy. It is buoyed by the victory of its controversial icon iNarendra Modi in Gujarat and is wasting no time in converting these successes into crucial political capital before the Lok Sabha elections scheduled for next year. The Congress party, on the other hand, is showing distinct signs of disorientation as a



result of this political outcome, with a sense of listlessness clearly discernible in its approach. Such a fainthearted response is unwarranted and unbecoming of a party that seized the high ground in the 2004 general election and exuberantly took up the reins of governance with the promise of bringing India back to its original moorings in secular democracy.

KEYWORDS : *Congress Party, new political energy, Indian Democracy.*

INTRODUCTION :

In the summer of 2004, the Congress party appeared to have recast itself as a new political machine specially designed to take on the new post-globalization and post- Hindutva ground realities. It was able to wrest power from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance on the basis of its pointed rejection of the excluding implications of the NDA's economic policies and its divisive social policies. The Congress, shedding much of its earlier ideological crustiness, was able to convince the Indian voter that it could sustain the high growth trajectory without compromising on the imperative of ensuring equal access of all citizens to that prosperity. The powerful allure of the symbolism of the combined leadership of Sonia Gandhi, representing the party's traditional commitment to the poor and the deprived, and Manmohan Singh, the iconic reformer taking India on a higher trajectory of economic growth, 'thus fulfilling the dreams of many a middleclassIndian, ensured the Congress a

triumphant return to the centre of the political arena. From that moment, as the leading party of the governing coalition, the United Progressive Alliance, the Congress has had an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild the centre of the Indian political field, making the revitalisation of Indian democracy its main focus.

Yet as a political entity, the Congress party appears singularly unable to transcend and , overcome its traditional failings. As often noted, its first problem is its intrinsic vulnerability as a political organisation with its over-dependence on the political charisma of the dynastic leadership of the Nehru-Gandhis. This, in turn, shuts out the possibility of adding new heroes or heroines to its pantheon. Thus a Manmohan Singh who has caught the imagination of middle-class India because of his persistent espousal of policies that break the mould as regards the economy and international relations cannot be projected as a counterpoint to an Atal Bihari Vajpayee, thereby leaving large swathes of middle-class constituencies ripe for the BJP's picking. The alacrity with which the BJP launches new leaders and new heroes, at the national level and at the level of the States even as it gives its veterans a larger than - life stature, has a powerful pull on the public imagination. More importantly, the BJP's continuous projection of itself as a dynamic political organisation, blending reverence for the old with a lively appreciation of the new, contrasts sharply with the : self-perception of the Congress party - which in times of failure tends to retreat into a shell, emerging only to defend its leaders rather than stand by its policies or beliefs.

The party's "introspection meeting," held soon after its defeat in the Gujarat Assembly elections, shied away from taking the bull by the horns. It blamed itself for not effectively countering Mr. Modi's "playing of the communal card" after Ms Sonia Gandhi's "maut ke saudagar" (merchants of death) statement and after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's "misquoted" observation that the Congress would reopen the Godhra riot cases. The only other point made was that by failing effectively to counter Mr. Modi's verbal attacks on the Congress leadership, the party unwittingly allowed him to equate himself with Dr. Singh and Ms Gandhi. Ironically, it was also left to the lower-rung leaders of the Gujarat party unit to take the blame for the defeat, with the general secretary in charge, B.K. Hari Prasad, and the state party chief, Bharatsinh Solanki, asserting that they owned the responsibility for the debacle. Given that the party's ideological and political strategies were conceptualized in New Delhi, such declarations of "responsibility for the defeat" had a farcical ring to them. What is painfully clear at this moment is that the Congress party's evident demoralization is bringing in its wake some ideological vacillation in its defence of secularism as a cardinal democratic principle. The failure to take secularism as a doctrine out of the context of Hindu-Muslim contestation has led to this sense of political vulnerability that makes the Congress weak need in the face of well-scripted BJP and Hindu nationalist campaigns.

As in the past, the BJP and its managers recognise that the Congress remains afraid of confronting the spectre of majoritarian communalism. After Mr. Modi's win in Gujarat, the BJP declared that it would "replicate the combination Hindutva and development" as an election plank in other States. The Gujarat election results and the Congress party's defensive response have enabled the BJP to bring the issue of "minority appeasement" back on the political agenda. The party's Prime-Minister-in-waiting, L.K.Advani, was quick to excoriate the UPA for its "soft approach to terrorism, guided by vote-bank considerations" and "emboldening the forces of jehadi terrorism." It is clear that the BJP is continuing to rely on the strategies of majoritarian communal mobilisation in attempting to rebuild its popular support in time for the 15th general election.

But at this moment, these represent aspirations rather than anything that reflects ground realities. There is no evidence as yet that beyond its own organisational resurgence in the wake of the

election victories-in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh the BJP has captured fresh political space. The Congress as the leading party of the UPA does have a particular responsibility to highlight the imperative of secularism as a governing concept in a pluralist democracy, rather than allow a crucial component of democratic governance to be held hostage by the politics of competing communal forces. Secularism an idea that has a resonance beyond the context of inter-communal disputes. It is a component of the democratic framework, as critical as federalism or linguistic autonomy and it should be understood for what it really is - part and parcel of the democratic commitment, beyond the terrain of electoral politics. It is for the Congress to restore the original meaning of the concept of secularism as intended by the framers of the Constitution. At this juncture when the Hindu nationalist forces believe that they have scored a point with the Gujarat election victory and therefore seek to reopen the debate on secularism in the public arena, the Congress should take the lead in this regard. The failure to explain the true significance of secularism as a farsighted enabling measure rather than a bland barometer of the state's neutrality is at the heart of the Congress party's political weakness.

Another political fallacy that has served to intimidate parties and leaders seeking to uphold the validity of the constitutional framework has been the simplistic argument that once leaders and parties win elections, their ideological challenges to the democracy structure thereby become legitimate. This dangerous argument was advanced after the general election of 1980, which returned Indira Gandhi to power.

Her defenders advanced the thesis that authoritarian lapses such as the Emergency were now redeemed. A similar argument in favour of the Hindutva agenda has been made in the wake of Mr.Modi's return to the helm in Gujarat. Winning elections gives the right to leaders and "Parties to govern; by no stretch of imagination can this be said to endorse their actions or policies that go against the fundamental tenets of Indian democracy. The Congress party must grasp this essential point if it desires to consolidate its political space, which is under constant pressure from the forces of the Hindu Right. As the leading party in the governing coalition, the congress cannot shy away from this responsibility if it wants to play an enduring role in India's political life.

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