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The Opposition: Problems and Prospects

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Due to the fragmented opposition, the only alternative to the continued dominance of the Congress party has been political instability. Congress dominance may be interrupted by an interregnum of decline and resultant instability; this in turn may be followed by the restoration of Congress dominance. Such a scenario of dominance-decline-chaos-restoration may become a recurrent pattern, throwing the system into periodic throes of uncertainty.

The development of an effective and meaningful opposition is, therefore, the critical need of the post-1971 political system. But recognition of the need for it does not by itself create a viable opposition. The growth of the opposition would seem to depend upon many factors, such as awareness of the system's needs, proper role-perception, current assessment of the nature of the Congress regime, working out of a sound programmatic and organisational strategy, evolution of a proper political style, and projection of a suitable image. All these require farsighted and imaginative leadership as well as rigorous efforts at political analysis and conceptualisation. The present paper attempts to lay down some major guidelines for such conceptualisation.

THE political system in India is facing a serious crisis. In spite of massive victories in the 1971 parliamentary and the 1972 state assembly elections, the Congress has failed to show the requisite will and capacity to alter the parameters of political and economic constraints and to pursue effectively the policies and programmes promised to the people. As a result, the economy is stagnant, hardships are mounting and large areas in the country are in the throes of political uncertainty due, largely, to in-fighting among Congressmen. The euphoria produced by the re-emergence of one-party dominance has almost withered away. Popular resentment has grown and people's confidence in the system is getting eroded. Is the punitive mood of 1967 returning? In the absence of any worthwhile opposition, what useful purpose can it serve?

The present crisis highlights the importance of opposition in the balancing dynamics of the political system. It also highlights the crucial weakness of the system of one-party dominance in not providing for orderly succession. The fourth general elections had opened up a fine opportunity for the establishment of a more or less balanced government-opposition equilibrium. However, the mistakes of the non-Congress parties and events in the Congress leading to the split and thereafter gave a shattering blow to the opposition. The 1971 and 1972 elections reduced all the opposition parties to ineffective entities. In the 1971 parliamentary elections, the strength of Congress (O) declined from 65 to 16, that of Swatan-

tra from 42 to 8, the Jan Sangh from 35 to 22, the SSP from 23 to 3 and the PSP from 13 to 2. Only the CPI and CPM more or less retained their strength but the CPI had an electoral alliance with the Congress in many states. The same story is repeated in the state assembly elections of 1971 and 1972. For example, the strength of the Swatantra party declined from 259 to 63, that of the Jan Sangh from 263 to 148, the SSP from 178 to 86, the PSP from 103 to 6, the CPM from 126 to 60. The Congress (O) got only 86 seats. Only the CPI increased its seats from 123 to 139. In the aggregate, the opposition seats in parliament were reduced from 237 to 165, and in the state assemblies from 1751 to 1181. Many opposition stalwarts were routed at the polls. The opposition groups stood dazed and demoralised with their sense of efficacy badly shattered.

Such a collapse of the opposition poses many problems for the system. Major among them are problems concerning alternation and legitimacy. Due to the fragmented opposition, the only alternative to the continued dominance of the Congress party has been political instability. Thus Congress dominance may be interrupted by an interregnum of its decline and resultant instability; this in turn may be followed by the restoration of Congress dominance. Such a scenario of dominance-decline-chaos-restoration may become a recurrent pattern, throwing the system into periodic throes of uncertainty. Further, such a situation may also accentuate the legitimacy problem. Under the present system, opposition parties, enjoying the

support of almost half the electorate, have to be satisfied with a marginal and peripheral role. Denial of a share in governance to such a large section of the body politic may create wide spread alienation and frustration on the part of non-Congress voters and parties. These problems do not merely concern the fate of individual opposition parties; they have wider systemic implications.

The development of an effective and meaningful opposition is the critical need of the post-1971 political system. For restoring competitiveness to the polity as well as for providing a reasonable alternative in the event of Congress decline, the importance of opposition can hardly be exaggerated.

But recognition of the need for it does not by itself create an opposition. The growth of opposition would seem to depend critically upon many factors such as awareness of the system's needs, proper role-perception, correct assessment of the nature of the Congress regime, the working out of a sound programmatic and organisational strategy, evolution of a proper political style, and the projection of a suitable image. All these require far-sighted and imaginative leadership as well as rigorous efforts at political analysis and conceptualisation. Opposition parties in India have long suffered from lack of proper attention to and emphasis on theoretical analysis and conceptual framework.

The present paper attempts to lay down some major rubrics of such conceptualisation that may provide points for a much needed debate and

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The role and scope of the opposition have thus to be conceived within the parameters of strength and strains in the Congress system. In the one-party dominance system, the process of opposition is not restricted only to the opposition parties. Various pressure groups, the press and intra-party competition within the dominant party also contribute to the process of opposition. But intra-party competition as a substitute for inter-party competition suffers from some drawbacks. Such intra-party factional competition is unstable, unpredictable and autonomous from electoral processes. It is also weak in representational functioning; factions fight or compromise at will without any reference to voters and their differences are not openly debated or settled. Hence, the need for a strong opposition party cannot be exaggerated.

The present time seems opportune for the opposition forces in many ways. The unprecedented price rise and stagnant production have created a serious economic crisis. Failure on the economic front has affected the charisma and the popular confidence in the capability of the leadership of Indira Gandhi.⁷ This has led to accentuation of factionalism in the Congress, creating political instability in many parts of the country and widespread disenchantment with the ruling party.⁸ A situation of this kind is favourable for the growth of the opposition. In fact, the opposition has never been insignificant at the electoral level even in the heydays of the Congress. Its poll percentages in the successive elections were, 55.0 in 1952, 52.3 in 1957, 55.3 in 1962, 59.1 in 1967, 56.4 in 1971 and 55.3 in 1972. However, in terms of seats, the opposition share was only 25.6 per cent in 1952, 24.9 in 1957, 27.0 in 1962, 45.6 in 1967, 32.1 in 1971 and 29.0 in 1972. Thus the opposition failure has not been at the level of vote aggregation, but in regard to converting its vote into seats. One sometimes hears people blaming the 'illiterate and poor' electorate for the poor performance of the opposition. But the real failure seems to be at the intermediate level of leadership and institution-building.

The failure of the opposition to capitalise on its significant electoral support is due to three main factors: (i) excessive plurality and fragmentation of opposition parties, (ii) obsession with ideological purity and dogma-fixation, inhibiting the evolution of a broad-

based programme to aggregate scattered political groups and (iii) weak institutionalisation and lack of stable support-base.

The fragmentation of opposition forces has been dysfunctional to their effectiveness. A glance at the vote-seat multiplier (see Table) of the Congress and the opposition will bear this out. A fragmented opposition means a lack of credible alternative to the Congress. The consolidation of opposition forces is, therefore, necessary to escape the dominance-decline-chaos-restoration scenario, indicated earlier.

However, such a consolidation ought not to occur without reference to ideological affinity or programmatic coherence, although these may be conceived of in broader terms, so as to permit optimum aggregation without doing violence to essential ideological cohesion. This requires a judicious mixture of firmness on basic principles and flexibility over details. Looking to the nature and complexion of the Congress it is likely that such opposition consolidation may crystallise into two groups — one representing the leftist opposition around the two Communist parties and the other the rightist or non-Communist opposition. Perhaps the various Socialist parties may desire to form a third group. If these groupings are devised in a broad and catholic way, they can provide the necessary nuclei for opposition consolidation.

Perhaps the greatest single failure of the opposition has been its weak institutionalisation. Much of opposition in the country has been a one-issue affair. This is not to say that it was not effective in its immediate purpose, but it did not develop stable and permanent institutional structures permeating various groups and areas. Lack of institution-building has led to a weak and shifting electoral base. From the point of party-identification, 42.6 per cent of voters in 1967 felt a close affinity to the Congress, the corresponding figures for various opposition parties being 5.1 for the Swatantra, 7.0 for the Jan Sangh, 4.1 for the Communist parties, 4.8 for the Socialist parties, and 6.3 for other parties.⁹ Thirty per cent of voters had no party-identification. Such a low degree of party-identification shows that the opposition has not been able to build up stable institutional loyalty. This is also reflected in the low retention capacity of opposition parties in regard to votes as well as seats. Perhaps, the opposition has been concentrating too much on evolving an

ideological alternative to the Congress, but this task is elusive and slippery because of the ambiguous and eclectic nature of 'the Congress ideology'. What is needed instead is an institutional alternative to the Congress. Such an institutional alternative can be created only by giving high priority to organisational tasks and to interest-aggregation on a vast scale.

SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

Over and above these failures of the opposition parties, there are also systemic constraints on the growth of opposition. In the one-party dominance system, the dominant party has remarkable capacity to articulate oppositional inputs.¹⁰ The intra-party factions of the dominant party also contribute to the process of opposition. Instead of a stable, structured and continuous functioning of opposition parties and a predictable interaction between them and government, there is the transient, diffuse and intermittent set of responses to specific government policies and *ad hoc* supportive actions. A further problem arises from the fact that conflicts between government and opposition are usually resolved by the abandonment or revision of the policy which occasions such conflicts; they are seldom resolved by a change of rulers. When some groups in government are under great opposition pressure, other groups in the ruling party come forward to wrest the initiative by aggregating oppositional inputs into alternative courses of action. The ruling party's open character and its adaptive mechanism make such a strategy of undercutting the opposition parties' support base possible. The next difficulty in the way of the opposition's growth is that the very social groups which the opposition mobilises for political action through peaceful or violent activity, shift their allegiance to the dominant party either in an effort to negotiate a settlement of their demands or soon thereafter in order to remain entrenched in the new advantaged position. Thus groups, politicised and mobilised by the opposition parties, may switch their loyalty, join the Congress, and leave the opposition high and dry. This need not be attributed solely to political opportunism. As democratic politics begins to penetrate a segmented society and politicises new groups, traditional relationships break down and new linkages must be forged quickly with the political centre to strengthen one's position relative to other competing groups. Where politics is the

being used as a substitute for a sombre analysis of the causes of the opposition's defeat in that election. In 1972, the opposition parties decided to 'go it alone' and fared no better. The idea of an alliance of like-minded parties is both sound and inescapable in prevailing circumstances. The grand alliance failed because it was tried halfheartedly, because it was devoid of any programmatic understanding and, above all, because it was conceived negatively by aiming it against one person, the Prime Minister. The Congress was able to exploit its negative character with telling effect by ridiculing it as a single-point programme of Indira Hatao. Stanley Hegbinbotham has made a study of the impact of the four-party alliance in elections in Uttar Pradesh. He finds that the charge of Muslim votes being alienated by the alliance with the Jan Sangh is not borne out by aggregate voting data. Further he makes a comparative study of 62 alliance constituencies and 23 open contest constituencies. Evidently there was an anti-opposition and pro-Congress trend; but alliance partners lost only 17 per cent of their 1967 voters in the alliance constituencies as against the loss of 34 per cent in the open contest constituencies. Again, out of the five seats won by the alliance partners in Uttar Pradesh, four were won in the alliance constituencies. According to him: "The bulk of the evidence then suggests that the four-party alliance did not substantially contribute to the ill fortunes of the opposition and may, in fact, have kept the opposition from doing somewhat worse than it did in 1971."¹²

Similar evidence is also available from a comparative analysis of the 1971 and 1972 election results in regard to Gujarat. A break-up of the 1971 parliamentary elections according to assembly seats indicates that the Congress could have won 80 assembly seats, out of which it would have got an absolute

TABLE: VOTE-SEAT CORRELATION

Election	Congress			Opposition		
	Vote Percentage	Seat Percentage	Vote-Seat Multiplier	Vote Percentage	Seat Percentage	Vote-Seat Multiplier
1952	45.0	74.4	1.65	55.0	25.6	0.48
1957	47.7	75.1	1.57	55.3	24.9	0.47
1962	44.7	73.0	1.63	55.3	27.0	0.48
1967	40.9	54.4	1.35	59.1	45.6	0.75
1971	43.5	67.9	1.56	56.4	32.1	0.55
1972	44.7	71.0	1.58	55.3	29.0	0.52

Note: Figures for 1972 are of assembly elections; while those for other years are of parliamentary elections.

(iii) The misgivings about the strategy of alliances need to be corrected. The failure of the so-called 'grand alliance' in the 1971 elections has cast grave doubts about the efficacy of this electoral strategy by opposition parties. The idea of 'the grand alliance' has become a convenient whipping-boy and is

(ii) Formulation of such wider creation of wider political entities.

(i) None of the existing political parties appears capable of developing into an effective and credible alternative to the Congress. They certainly have pockets of influence in particular areas; perhaps in some states, a single opposition party may be able to provide an alternative to the Congress. But no party can reasonably hope to develop into an all-India force or even a regional force covering a group of states. It appears that these parties have reached the stage of maximum growth under their present identity and format. The only way out of this situation seems to be a search for the

The major postulates of the broad strategy for the opposition's growth may

III

Such systemic constraints make the task of building an opposition in a one-party dominance system very difficult. The survey undertaken so far of the opportunities and limitations within whose parameters the opposition has to build itself, can help in evolving a proper role-perception as well as in delineating broad contours of an appropriate strategy for the opposition.

debating national issues and contesting parliamentary elections.

(v) A useful plank of the opposition strategy can be to split the centre (that is, the centrist forces in the Congress ideological spectrum). There are organic links between the continued dominance of the centre and the one-party dominance system. One cannot exist without the other. Hence the success of the opposition will depend on its capacity to attract centrist elements into its fold. So far the opposition has paid more attention to attracting support at the ideological extremities rather than at the ideologically ambiguous centrist sector. Ideological rigidity and purism may get the support of extremist elements; but they are dysfunctional in making a dent in the dominant position of the centrist forces.

(vi) It is observed that the opposition parties play a 'reactive' rather than a 'directing' role. The result has been that not only policy initiatives but also political offensives have generally rested with the ruling party. This has greatly affected the legitimacy of the opposition as a credible alternative to the Congress and has hampered its development.

IV

Besides a proper role-perception and a sound strategy, the opposition requires (a) proper leadership (b) programme (c) organisation and (d) proper political style and a favourable image.

(a) Leadership is a critical factor in party-building but opposition parties have not paid due attention to it. Most of them suffer from a vacuum of leadership at the intermediate and lower levels of organisation. Even at the national level the leaders of most opposition parties are old and tired. They have been in those top positions for so long that no new persons have been able to come up. There has been practically no circulation of elites in several of the opposition parties, the leftist parties being more guilty in this regard. They have thus come to project an image of an aged party and do not inspire young people to join their organisations. They need to refurbish their image if they hope to attract new people. Projecting a youthful leadership is indispensable. Recruitment and promotion of elites within the party organisation has so far been a neglected aspect of party-building which must receive attention if a party does not intend fading out of public imagination.

(b) It is difficult to overstate the importance of having a proper programme. Such a programme ought to be flexible and broad-based so as not to become dogmatic or restrictive. It must be pragmatic rather than ideology-inspired, although it must be anchored to a definite political outlook. Further, the 'ideological distance' between the Congress and the opposition should not be too much or too little. Extremist positions would push the opposition into futile polemics and a peripheral wilderness; while an identical ideology or 'me-tooism' would blur the alternative image of the opposition and undercut its support. Therefore, there should be a clearcut and easily perceivable programmatic difference with the ruling party. Again, the programmatic alternatives have to be related to the basic features and policies of the political system and government. Picking up stray issues may help momentarily but continuous and stable opposition cannot be built on such issues. From this point of view, certain issues can be identified over which programmatic debate can be raised. On the economic front, price rise and deficit financing, stagnant industrial production, the size of the Fifth Plan and its relationship to our resource-mobilisation capacity, the return to the economic model with more emphasis on heavy industry as against agriculture and consumer goods, the introduction of a public distribution system in foodgrains, — all these are live issues. The opposition will have to formulate a clear stand and educate the people on the relative merits and demerits of various policy alternatives on these issues. Similarly, on the political plane also, there are issues like the need for cleaner elections and reforms in the electoral system, and the need to check the increasing role of money in politics and how to do it, establishing healthy traditions regarding many aspects of democratic politics, and the need for greater autonomy for state governments.

One may go on making a list of issues on which public debate is called for.¹⁴ In short, there is no dearth of issues. What it needed is an imaginative and judicious approach to select the most salient and fundamental issues and to work out therefrom a coherent programme, capable of purposive political debate as well as optimum interest aggregation.

(c) Organisation or institutionalisation is the third critical variable. Party-building has not been a strong point of the opposition in India. Institutionalisation

in this context has four major aspects. First, it relates to inter-party co-ordination, involving alliances, fronts or mergers. The need for such inter-party co-ordination arises from the failure of the opposition parties in interest-aggregation beyond a certain point. Party alliances are but an extension of the process of interest-aggregation to the inter-party level. Thus, the retardation of interest-aggregation within a party makes inter-party co-ordination imperative. In respect of the processes of politicisation, mobilisation, aggregation and institutionalisation the two are similar. Secondly, at the level of party-structure, there has been overemphasis on centralisation. Tradition of a party high command, developed during the independence struggle and fortified thereafter have created tensions in almost every opposition party. In a country as vast and complex as India, there has to be greater scope for regional autonomy and variation. A federal party structure is more suited to Indian conditions. Autonomy of local units should therefore be encouraged and respected. Deficiency in this regard has led to the break-up of quite a few opposition parties. Thirdly, the major problem in organisation is mobilisation and exoan-sion of support. In this case, the Congress has a broader socio-economic support base than the opposition.¹⁵ The opposition will have to broaden its support base, to spread its mobilisation efforts to wider areas, and to develop a strong sense of party-identification and institutional loyalty. Fourthly, organisation needs an infrastructure of diverse institutions working among different segments of society like the youth, organised labour, women, etc. It must also create institutions in the co-operative, municipal and panchayat raj areas. Without such an associational infrastructure, it is not possible to gain and sustain support which will remain with the opposition through all vicissitudes.

(d) Political style and image-projection are the other imperatives for the opposition's growth. The first task is to build up legitimacy regarding the opposition. The second task is to project a pro-people image. In policy debates, this aspect does not always receive the attention it merits. For this purpose, the pro-people implications of suggested policy alternatives should be imaginatively brought out and highlighted by symbolic actions and movements.

While elections and parliamentary politics are very important in a demo-

eratic system, there is need for taking up the wider tasks of political education among the people. But many parties go to the people only at election time and do not maintain continuous contact with them. Only sustained work among the people can give strength and vitality to a party. The opposition in India may do well to remember this.

We have outlined above some of the major critical variables for opposition consolidation and growth as well as various alternatives available therein.

V

The present crisis in Indian politics demands a strong opposition as a corrective counterbalance to Congress dominance and as an insurance cushion in the event of its decline. The task is challenging but the stakes are equally staggering.

Will the opposition forces prove equal to the task? So far they have missed many opportunities by short-sighted policies and opportunistic politics. Their record does not inspire much hope or confidence.

Old and out-dated modes of thinking and working will not do any longer. The need is to think and act boldly and bravely. A plethora of small and stunted opposition parties can serve no purpose. They should, therefore, strive to acquire a wider political entity that can give them a proper role and a sense of efficacy. It is true that such an effort has no precedent to guide it and in that sense it is a journey into the unknown.

Notes

- 1 Comparison of legislative strength in regard to all parties except Congress(O) is based on the election outcomes of 1967, 1971 and 1972. In the case of Congress (O) the 1971 and 1972 performances are compared with its parliamentary strength in 1971 prior to the dissolution of the earlier parliament. In computing assembly seats for various parties, the outcomes of the assembly elections in 1971 and 1972 are added up.
- 2 Ram Joshi and Kirtidev Desai, "Dominance with a Difference: Strains and Challenges", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, February 1973, pp 189-96.
- 3 For further discussion see, Ram Joshi, "Problems of Building an Opposition in a One-Party Dominance System" (mimeo). A paper read at Poona University in April 1973.
- 4 Joshi and Desai, *op cit*, pp 190, 195.
- 5 Baldev Raj Nayar, "The Modernisation Imperative and Indian Planning", Vikas Publications, Bombay, 1972, pp 11-24.
- 6 For the debate about policy-alternatives in this regard, see *ibid*, pp 38-74.
- 7 According to the Indian Institute of Public Opinion Survey, the popularity of Indira Gandhi declined from 260 score points in January 1972 to 161 score points in February 1973. This score is equal to her pre-split score. See *Weekly Round Table*, June 10, 1973.
According to *Sandesh*, August 7 1973, a Gujarati daily published from Ahmedabad, the score declined to 109 in June 1973.
- 8 In the 53 by-elections held after the 1971 elections, the Congress has suffered some reverses. It lost 21 per cent of its parliamentary seats and it could win only 55 per cent of assembly seats as against 71 per cent of seats in the 1972 elections. Further, the Congress vote in these by-elections declined from 44.7 per cent in 1972 to 42.7 per cent. See V B Singh, "By-elections after 1971" *Hindustan Times*, June 10, 1973.
- 9 Rajni Kothari, "The Political Change of 1967", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, January 1971, pp 231-50.
- 10 Robert Stern, "The Process of Opposition in India", Chicago University Press, 1970.
- 11 For a more detailed discussion see Joshi, *op cit*.
- 12 Stanley J Heginbotham, "The 1971 Revolution in Indian Voting Behaviour", *Asian Survey*, December 1971, pp 1146-50.
- 13 From the statistical analysis prepared by the Department of Political Science, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad.
- 14 For a stimulating and incisive list of tasks and issues see Rajni Kothari, "Challenge of the Hustings: From Electoral Manipulation to Policy Performance", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number, July 1971, pp 1549-56 and Rajni Kothari, "Political Economy of Garibi Hatao" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number, August 1972, pp 1541-52.
- 15 D L Sheth, "Profiles of Party Support in 1967", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, June 1971, pp 1541-52.