

Book Review

Hasan, Z. (2009-19). *Ideology and Organization in Indian Politics: Polarization and the Growing Crisis of the Congress Party*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022, 224pp. Rs. 1495.

Indian Politics has witnessed transformational changes for the past few decades including a political shift of upper and middle castes to the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and of lower-caste elites to regional parties; blunting of identity politics based on caste; expansion of majoritarianism and the rise of Right. Majority of the recent scholarship has seen these changes in the light of the rise of the BJP. Hasan, on the other hand, tries to see these trends in Indian politics from an alternative vantage point, placing the Congress party at the centre of enquiry and exploring the *Crisis* of the once-dominant party. Although the book specifically refers to the time period between 2009 to 2019, the author builds upon her previous works and provides readers with a multi-dimensional, comprehensive, historical, detailed and analytical account by trying to locate the crisis in factors, both internal and external to the Congress party and the interface between the factors. She seeks to further study the role played by context, ideology and organization in making and unmaking of political parties.

The text is thematically divided into six chapters spanning across issues and trends in Indian Politics. Chapter One, titled 'Democratic Reorganization Eludes the Congress Party' shows how Congress traversed from being a party of conflict mediation, bargaining and consensus to a party characterized by organizational decay, atrophy, ideological obfuscation and leadership crisis. She gives a background of the factors which ailed the Congress since the time of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and identifies reasons for the same, such as institutional erosion, organizational stagnation, irregular elections, a lost connection with grass-root level, side-lining of state leaders and centralization at the cost of party's ideology of consensus. This ultimately led to the breaking away of regional parties, defections, lack of intra-party democracy and internal resistance to change, despite Rahul Gandhi's keenness to democratize.

In Chapter Two, 'Collapse of the United Progressive Alliance', Hasan looks at the political fallout of the Congress Party in the 2014 general elections and identifies what went wrong during the UPA regime which preceded the elections. The Congress had lacked a cohesive ideological ground and

suffered from policy paralysis, leadership and organizational gap, unchecked corruption and indecisiveness. Despite the introduction of an array of progressive, social welfare legislation during its two tenures such as that of food security, rural employment guarantee, Right to Information, Congress could not take any credit for the same in wake of corruption scandals, incompetence, favouritism, the BJP's obstructionist tactics in Parliament, and a concerted effort by the powerful right-wing groups which wanted to see the end of Congress. This also got manifested in India Against Corruption Movement which drew the public sentiment against Congress, and both the capitalist class and media got inclined towards pro-business BJP.

In Chapter Three, 'The Gujarat Model and the Turn to the Right', the author critiques the much-revered Gujarat model of economic development and looks at the rightward shift of Indian Politics. The 2014 general elections were fought on the idea of development and Gujarat model was seen as a key example of development, led by the then Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP, Mr. Modi, who was seen as a pro-business, strong leader, a 'Development Man' with great oratory skills and hopes for the masses. The BJP came to power and this uncritical acceptance of pro-business model led to a rightward turn of Indian politics. In contrast to a lacklustre campaign by the Congress party, BJP had an elaborate outreach programme. The author contextualises BJP's win in its electoral management with the support of RSS (and affiliated organizations) in providing a 'well-oiled political machine' and helping 'election engineering, propaganda, mobilization and booth management' with a dedicated cadre of grass-root workers. The elections witnessed an unprecedented use to techno-led mobilization and use of modern communication technology by the BJP, with the help of social media platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter.

In Chapter Four, 'Secular Politics on the Back Foot', the author writes that the BJP envisages India as a majoritarian nation-state rather than a pluralist multicultural one. It could consolidate a political majority beyond other factors of identity like caste, and religion took over. Unsure of a response to BJP's Hindutva, the Congress Party took to 'Soft Hindutva', which did no good to the electoral results of the Congress and in fact hampered the idea of secularism that the Congress Party had so far stood for. Furthermore, arguing against the accusations of Muslim appeasement, she opines that political pampering of Muslims by the Congress provided only a symbolic support and no substantial benefit to the Muslims.

In Chapter Five, 'Hindu Nationalism to the Fore', the author argues that in 2019 general elections, the BJP put forth an idea of majoritarian symbolism instead of development. Backed by enormous money and the support of electronic and print media, those elections were fought on a three-point campaign of Nationalism (national security, Pakistan and terrorism), Hinduism and anti-corruption. Hasan distinguishes between the post-independent 'inclusive nationalism' of the Congress and the 'Hindu nationalism' of the BJP. While material politics occupied a backstage, Congress could not build a counter-narrative highlighting its own idea of nationalism. BJP's massive victory in 2019 election shows, in her words, 'a structural shift in Indian politics reflected in the emergence of a de facto majoritarian democracy'.

In Chapter Six, 'Opposition Interrupted' Hasan takes a critical look at the events such as abrogation of Art 370 and 35A of the Constitution (pertaining to the Union territory of Jammu & Kashmir), settlement of Ayodhya dispute and Citizenship Amendment Act. She further points out at the erosion of institutions such as Election Commission of India, Central Vigilance Commission; dilution of Right to Information; usage of corporate power and election financing during 2019 elections. She points at the largely non-existent politics of Congress outside the Parliament and its non-impactful social media presence, which ultimately led to a weak opposition to the ruling party.

However, she emphasizes the fact that the Congress is the only party with social, intellectual and historical capital, having a pan-India footprint and that a liberal consolidation against the BJP is not possible without Congress. She, while identifying problems within the Congress, gives hope and suggests reforms. In a deeply divided polity where centrism and consensus don't seem to work, she advises Congress to widen its electoral bandwidth by banding together with opposition parties, strengthening the alliance-coalition framework, electing a leader to keep the party united, reconstructing its organizational structure across the states, conducting a pan-India membership drive and projecting as well propagating a clear alternative ideological narrative to the BJP by reaffirming its philosophy of secularism, nationalism, social justice while underlining its past achievements. She vouches for a democratic renewal of the Congress party in accordance with the contemporary needs.

Although she focuses upon Congress but refers largely to challenges facing the non-BJP parties and centrist parties in other democracies 'in the wake of upsurge of populist nationalism and right-wing parties.'

The author, by a wide coverage of primary and secondary sources, gives a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter and significantly contributes to the field of study pertaining to Indian politics and political parties. She draws her thesis from authentic sources and quite elaboratively provides an analysis about factors that led to the crisis of Congress and its impact on the Indian political scenario over the past decades. She explains her thesis in a quite lucid manner using easily comprehensible, crisp arguments.

The text provides useful insights to scholars of social sciences in general, and Indian politics in particular. It may prove useful for scholars dealing in election studies, psephology and study of party system and political parties. It may also be helpful to political analysts, journalists or readers interested in knowing politics, in general. Furthermore, it may provide some important inputs to the Congress party, owing to the various measures and reforms that the author suggests.

As compared to recent works on Indian politics like *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (2021) by Christophe Jaffrelot and *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* (2018) by Ajay Gudavarthy which see the changes in Indian Politics keeping the rise of BJP at the centre of enquiry, Hasan takes a more comprehensive view and views the changes from the perspective of the Congress party.

However, even though the author claims that her thesis applies to centrist parties in major democracies across the globe, she barely provides examples or gives references. Providing examples would have helped in substantiating her thesis better. Also, she doesn't give a hopeful picture of regional parties and fails to contemplate upon them in the text. She further fails to talk about parties such as Aam Aadmi Party which maintain a pragmatic silence on issues concerning minorities and practice a silent majoritarianism.

Withstanding these issues, the text certainly provides important and critical insights into the changing nature of Indian Politics and makes a strong case for future scholarship towards further research and exploration on the subject.

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