

# Review of: "Indian National Congress's Hits and Misses in General Elections 2024"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Article Review: Indian National Congress's Hits and Misses in General Elections 2024. By- Praveen Rai,

<>. All kudos to Praveen Rai for his timely analysis of the Indian National Congress (INC), the organisational pillar of India's independence movement, and its post-Independence growth and development. Surprisingly, not many substantive studies about the INC have been undertaken. All kudos to Praveen for meeting this discourse need.

<>. My comments are offered in two parts.

**Part A:** <>. I would like this article to identify and examine in greater detail some key questions. Below, three examples are presented just for the purpose of illustration.

## Example 1- The 'dynastic succession' question

<>. There is a widespread belief that, because of dynastic succession, the INC is becoming weaker. The immediate basis of this argument rests on Rahul Gandhi, a fourth-generation Gandhi-Nehru family member, vying to become India's prime minister, and his complete failure in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, and his partial failure and success in the recently concluded 2024 elections. These failures have been attributed to the dynastic succession factor. Is this understanding completely factual?

Even when a non-family member like P.V. Narasimha Rao became the 9<sup>th</sup> prime minister (1991-1996) and headed the party between 1992 and 1994, the INC had lost the 1996 elections and Rao resigned from both posts. The INC won 140 seats, while the BJP won 161 seats. Earlier, the lowest figure the INC had reached was 154 during the 1977 elections. The INC performed even worse under its first non-family prime minister and president. Even when a second non-family member like Sitaram Kesri headed the INC (1996-1998), the party had won just 141 seats during the 1998 general elections.

## The larger context

<>. My point is that when we look at long-term trends, it is clear that the INC has been on a declining path after the 1991 elections. Since then, eight parliamentary elections have taken place. With the exception of the 2009 elections, the INC decline has been consistent, hitting its nadir in the 2014 elections.

For the INC, the 1990s was the watershed decade that set it on a road downhill. Why? The answer lies in the changing

larger context. The ideas of neo-liberalism have deeply affected the Indian state and society, with an enormous surge in private sector growth and the growing influence of the corporate sector. It is this sector which is promoting the 'aspirational idea'. This attractive and alluring idea largely bypasses rural India. India and the world are changing, and the INC has yet to reinvent itself in aspirational India. Can it? That is the moot question.

<>. There is another side to the decline of the INC. For the sake of convenience, let me refer to it as a social mobility process of contestations between established elites vs. aspiring elites. These aspiring elites, whom the INC could not accommodate, find in the BJP the best route to achieve their ambitions. Who are these aspiring elites?

---From the 2014 elections onwards, the present ruling government and their associated organisations have been consciously promoting men and women into leadership positions based on three criteria: those who are self-made individuals, those hailing from the smaller towns of India, and those who have studied in Indian universities and claim an Indian *bhasa* as their first language. In this language, the aspiring elites have largely completed their schooling. In contrast, key decision makers during the Congress regime often had studied in European and American universities and had their schooling in the English language. These are the established elites who have now been displaced by the aspiring elites. The right wingers disparagingly call the established elites the 'Lutyens Gang'. They are referring to the liberal mindset to which they have great antipathy.

<>. The centrist ideology is not only waning in India but throughout the world. In several nation-states, there has been a surge in authoritarian right-wing regimes. Common citizens are drawing away from centrist ideologies. Paradoxically, what was at one time the strength of the INC today has become its weakness. These are some of the larger contexts contributing to the decline of the INC.

#### Example 2.-Social diversity

<>. Line 14 (Conclusion section, page-7) speaks of 'social diversity'. In the 1996 elections, the INC was reduced to 140 seats in the parliamentary elections. P V N Rao resigned as prime minister and as party president in September. Rao was succeeded by Sitaram Kesri, the INC's first non-Brahman leader (1996 & 1997). What happened next? Kesri flaunted "his proximity with UP-Bihar backward caste leaders such as Mulayam Singh Yadav, Kanshi Ram, Lalu Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan, and Nitish Kumar. A fear soon emerged that Kesri was 'mandalising' the Congress, and its upper caste leaders, already losing popular support in the Hindi heartland due to Mandal politics, would be pushed out of the party too" [Downloaded from the Internet, 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2024 : "Sitaram Kesri, the Congress president who had his dhoti pulled" by Darpan Singh].

---In a 1998 bloodless coup, Kesri was ousted as president of the INC. While several forces were at work, this coup was led by the family loyalists. Among the many divides within the INC, the one between the Gandhi-Nehru family loyalists and the non-loyalists is deep. Because Kesri had several accomplishments as a freedom fighter and a veteran congressman, he was found to be the most suitable candidate to become the INC president in 1996. But - striking an independent path - Kesri did not accommodate enough of the family loyalist members in key positions in the INC. When in 1998 several powerful disgruntled leaders came out in the open, an opportune moment had come, and Kesri was ousted. Several of the

internal dynamics of the INC revolve around this divide between loyalists and non-loyalists. The loyalists firmly believe that the Gandhi-Nehru family is the glue that unites the INC. Without this glue, the INC will fragment.

### Example 3 - Charisma and Personality

<>. One of the widely held beliefs is that the decline of the INC has been due to the lacklustre personality of Rahul-G. He was president of the INC from 2017 to 2019. In 2019, Rahul G resigned as president, taking responsibility for the party's debacle in the 2019 parliamentary elections. As a public personality, Rahul G has very few accomplishments either as an administrator or as a politician. But then, he has not had many chances. The two walkathons, physically strenuous, have made him a more acceptable personality for the Indian public. Possibly now, as leader of the opposition in the parliament, Rahul G may further blossom into a personality capable of leading the INC to victory. But there is a need to assess Rahul G in the context of the larger charismatic personality of the current PM, Narendra Modi.

<>. Abhishek Sharma tells us that “while the ideological arc helped the BJP, it was not solely responsible for its success in forging a pan-Hindu vote from a fragmented electorate, culminating in the once-in-a-generation electoral victory of 2014. It was Narendra Modi's charisma and unique popularity that played a pivotal role, with Mr. Modi's personal popularity surpassing that of the BJP by about eight percentage points according to the Lokniti post-poll survey of 2014” [*Duality – understanding Indian voter behavior*, page 8, Wednesday, July 31, 2024, The Hindu Editorial Page].

---The challenge before Rahul G and the INC is formidable. Politics and electioneering in India have centred on leaders with mass appeal and eloquence and rhetoric. Rahul G does not possess these attributes at present.

### Part B. ---Three specific comments

#### Comment 1.

<>. Since the expression “Hits and Misses” is carried in the very title itself, possibly these two aspects could be discussed in greater detail in the section on conclusions.

---The other option is to rephrase the title. The title should convey to the reader the key ideas that the researcher wants to convey. These ideas should be discussed in greater detail in the text.

#### Comment 2.

<>. RG should be spelt out at the first instance. Otherwise, readers could confuse between Rajiv G or Rahul G.

#### Comment 3.

<>. In the conclusion section, the article has listed out several reasons explaining the decline of the INC. All these reasons must be correct. Praveen, would it be possible for you to put on your thinking cap to differentiate between the more important reasons from the less important ones? This differentiation could add analytical rigour to this article.

<>. Praveen, I enjoyed reading your article. More important than the reading is the fact that I sat down and did a bit of research work understanding the INC. This was a task pending for a long, long time. Now I actually got down to it.

Thanks.

<>. Long, long time back, I recall reading a book or an article by Jim Masselos (Australian scholar) about the INC.

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