

## “A Brief History of the Office of the Prime Minister Of India”

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**Abstract:** The following paper aims to discuss the historical evolution of the office of the Prime Minister of India. With the colonial tradition in place at the advent of independence, the constituent assembly opted for a Parliamentary form of government, typical of the British Polity. This form of government brought the office of Prime Minister to the forefront and hence India, after seventy years since decolonization has seen a history of several dynamic personalities hold the prestigious office. The paper will, in chronological order, examine the tenures of various Prime Ministers of India. In order to understand better the position of a Prime Minister it would be pertinent to analyse certain historical events that became relevant to effecting the powers and prestige of the office. It would be imperative to state that various features of the Indian polity have had a massive effect on how a past office bearer have wielded their powers as Prime Minister, chief one being the party system of the country. Finally, as a result of attempting to understanding the relationship between the office of the Prime Minister and the prevailing party system of the country the evolving party system of the country will also be touched upon.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In order to lay the groundwork for understanding better the historical evolution of the office of the Prime Minister of India in relation with the evolving political party system of India we must fully understand the very concept of Political Parties, how they come into existence, how they work and what they aim to achieve. The writings of Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan elucidate the process involved, for a Political Party to come into existence.

They theorized that many of the political parties that existed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were based in part on earlier political conflicts dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier. Specifically, these conflicts ranged from national revolutions to the political aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. From these events arose cleavages, or divisions, within societies that gave rise to political groupings. Lipset and Rokkan classify these cleavages as *territorial* and *functional*.<sup>1</sup>

The Territorial Cleavages according to Lipset and Rokkan, arise when there exists a conflict between the central national building culture and that of the periphery. Here, the cultures on the periphery are classified as those differing in ethnicity, language, or religion from the center of the nation. On the other hand, Functional Cleavages can be interest specific or pointing towards specific ideologies. A very simple example to differentiate between the two is that on one hand, a conflict over a tract of land between an industrialist and the land owners would be considered as territorial whereas a conflict between the owners of an industry and its workers would be classified as functional.

The transformation of a conflict into a cleavage and then a political grouping, or party takes place only after particular thresholds are crossed in the development of a nation-state. These thresholds are (a) *legitimation*: Is there recognition of the right to protest? (b) *incorporation*: Are supporters of a movement given political citizenship rights? (c) *representation*: Can the new movement exist on its own, or must it join with older movements? And (d) *majority power*: Are there checks and balances against numerical majority rule?<sup>2</sup>

While analysing this theory of Lipset and Rokkan, Alexandra Cole states that the first two thresholds as mentioned above influence the development of a political party, while the latter two are related to the growth and development of the party system.

Polities across the world today are dominated by the idea of democracy and political parties have now become the fulcrum around which these democracies revolve. They perform certain functions that make them the hub of political activities in any polity. Political Parties nowadays, with a network spread across every part of any country become vital in the formulation of public opinion; they also serve as agencies of political education and socialization. Political Parties also play a vital role in the process of government formation in most democratic setups. Consequently, the parties also play a crucial role as opposition parties. It would be

imperative to make note of the fact that, political parties in varying political systems work in varying manners. In a Presidential form of government as is prevalent in the United States of America, the parties work in a way which is not in lines with the way they work in a typical Parliamentary form of government. The latter system would become crucial to understand for a better understanding of the complicated relationship between the Prime Minister of India the party system of India. In a Parliamentary system, the political parties become the binding force that holds together the working of the legislature and the executive together. Another very important function that political parties perform in this system is maintaining the balance of power by acting as a counter to arbitrary use of the excessive powers laid out for the Prime Minister, enjoying a clear majority in a typical two party setup. Their role in the Parliamentary system becomes even more intricate in a multi-party system where coalition politics become the center of struggle for power. In a nutshell, Political Parties become that vital link between the public and the government.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India was a man of principles and abided by them in every way possible. The democratic traditions of India were invaluable to him and hence he was always more leaning towards a Parliamentary form of government with a constitution which laid out the rights and freedoms of citizens in detail. With this combination in place in the constitution there was left, a lot of ambiguity on how the party system of India would shape to be. Much of the evolution of the party system of India was left to the citizens of the country to shape with immense freedoms given to them in the political realm. It goes without saying that with all the aforementioned factors affecting the Indian political system, the office of the Prime Minister became the center of attention. The Legislature and the executive were supposed to revolve around the Prime Minister and even though very detailed, the Constitution of India left much to conventions to fill any gaps in the political order. The Political system envisioned by the makers of the Constitution for India was to be centered around the office of the Prime Minister, but the wide range of political freedoms given to the public later brought the party system of India into prominence. Hence, it would be imperative to establish the two paramount factors that affect the working of the office of the Prime Minister. First we have the position of the Prime Minister in his party. Second test is the position of the party of the Prime Minister in the Lok Sabha.

### **The Nehruvian Era**

With the country on the brink of independence, the role of the Prime Minister became immensely important as a result of the which brings us to analyse the tenure of the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The prime minister is, in Nehru's words, the 'linchpin of Government'.<sup>3</sup> According to the constitution of India, almost all the executive powers formally vested in the President are in fact exercised by the prime minister which is essentially the key feature of a Parliamentary form of government. The Prime Minister becomes the link between the President, the cabinet, and the parliament, which again gives the office immense responsibilities and certainly makes it the most powerful office in the entire country. The position of the prime minister in India has acquired its pre-eminence at least partly from the fact that the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who retained his office for almost seventeen years, had such enormous prestige and influence that some of it rubbed off on to the office itself. The first ever general elections in India took place in the year 1951. The Congress party without any surprises enjoyed a thumping victory. Jawaharlal Nehru became India's first Prime Minister. Now if we assess whether he was a strong Prime Minister or not based on the two parameters established previously, his position in his party was not relatively strong, it was only after the death of Sardar Vallabhai Patel, who was probably the first preference of most Congress leaders to be Prime Minister, did he become invincible in the Indian National Congress and more so he was a strong personality and the position of his party in the Lok Sabha was very strong. In a nutshell, he was successful in establishing himself as a dominant and strong Prime Minister.

One significant aspect of the tenure of Nehru as Prime Minister was the role of the Cabinet and the Lok Sabha. The role played by both these institutions under the leadership of Nehru turned out to be key in shaping certain conventions that have survived till date, for instance; most of the bills introduced in the parliament are by the cabinet members. Comparisons are drawn by several scholars to the Diwan-E-Khas and Diwan-E-Aam for the Cabinet and Lok Sabha during Nehru's tenure respectively. In conclusion it can be said that the initial image that was set for the office of Prime Minister was exactly what the Constitution makers had foreseen. Another major reason why this happened was because The Congress was such a dominant force because it had a head start over any other political organization/party as it practically led the freedom struggle from the forefront. The party system in India at that point in time was a Single-party system. All in all, the dominance of the congress party was one the biggest reasons for the strength of the office of the Prime Minister. When we look back in history at the several policies of Nehru it only strengthens the argument of him being one of the strongest wielders of the office over the course of the last seventy years. First and foremost is his determination of putting in place the principle of Universal Adult Suffrage for the 1951 General Elections. Even though other countries, only recently decolonized just like India, across the world were against the application of this electoral policy owing to socio-economic cleavages within the society and widespread illiteracy. This was the case with India

too and many were skeptical of the idea of Universal Adult Suffrage but Nehru believed that the India's public was capable enough to invoke their political rights with vigour and responsibility. And so it proved to be, the General Elections of 1951 were a massive victory for Nehru's visionary approach and laid the foundation for the consolidation of India as a democracy. The foreign policy of Nehru is another paradigm of his bold policies as Prime Minister, which again was the result of the strong position of his office. The Non-Alignment Movement led from the front by Nehru stands out as one of the most debated foreign policy decisions of any Prime Minister of India. Critics of the movement saw clear vantage points for the newly developed states in aligning with either of the super powers, purely for economic benefits. But again the democratic morals of Nehru got in the way and he opted to raise his voice against this new concept of neo-colonialism in the international forum. He was joined by several other leaders who held similar opinions on the state of international relations post the second wave of decolonization. Bipin Chandra in his book, 'India since Independence' puts forth his views on this policy of Nehru;

*Non-alignment came to symbolize the struggle of India and other newly independent nations to retain and strengthen their independence from colonialism and imperialism. India being the first to become independent, rightly gave the lead to other ex-colonies in this respect. And collectively these nations counted for a great deal. In the UN, for example, whose membership had swollen with their entry, the one country, one vote system enabled the non-aligned bloc, often helped by the Soviets, to check domination by the Western bloc. Non-alignment, thus, advanced the process of democratization of international relations.<sup>4</sup>*

The death of Nehru in 1964 rid the Indian National Congress of a natural leader of both the government and the party. There seemed to be no single personality around whom both the party apparatus and the governmental institutions could revolve. This relationship here becomes very vital. The marquee reason behind the same is the prevailing one-party system in the country. The Congress party enjoyed a very comfortable two decades in power as the most powerful national party across the country largely owing to its nationalist traditions.

### **Congress and the Syndicate**

With the demise of Nehru and no single personality capable of filling his shoes the balance of power was bound to shift at least within the party. Congress was an unopposed political power on the national front, hence the saying, "When you don't have any enemies, you create them for yourself" fits well here. That is exactly what happened with the Congress. Power struggle was not for being in control of the nation but of the Congress. So with time political conflicts emerged within the Congress party. A power group often referred to as 'The Syndicate' came to control the party's agendas and working both at the state level and the national level. So, to address the question, "Who were the Syndicates?" - By the end of 1963, Nehru was dying. For the first time in sixteen years since independence, New Delhi was rife with speculation about the question - "Who will succeed Nehru?" To answer this question, four men met at the Tirupathi Temple in the beginning of October, 1963. These were K Kamaraj, the former Chief Minister of Madras, Sanjiva Reddy, an Andhra leader, Nijalingappa, the Chief Minister of Mysore and Atulya Ghosh, the president of Bengal Congress Committee. Together, these men controlled the power of the Congress party in non-Hindi states. Soon, along with a Maharashtra leader SK Patil, they would come to be known as the Syndicate. The Syndicate after Nehru's death became the most powerful group of individuals in the whole country. The extent of their political control over the Congress was evident from the very fact that they were able to convince Morarji Desai to second the nomination of Lal Bahadur Shastri for Prime Minister, who himself was a standout contender to be Prime Minister. So it becomes very evident that The Syndicate was in total control of practically everything that happened inside the Congress party. So if we try and assess the strength of the office of the Prime Minister, it can be said that, it suffered and was not as powerful as during the tenure of Nehru. Though the influence of the Syndicate did impact the strength of the Prime Minister but if looked at closely, their influence was restricted to the politics within the Congress party and not outside it. Though Lal Bahadur Shastri was chosen over Morarji Desai, he was still a significantly strong personality and had his party in a very good position in the Lok Sabha. His position in the party might not have been the strongest, but that alone is not sufficient to say that the Prime Minister's office became a weak one. It still remained the epitome of political power and the center of all decision making in the country. With the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1966, the Syndicate was left with the responsibility to pick another suitable candidate to take place of the deceased Prime Minister. Again they shunned any speculations of Morarji Desai swearing in and chose Indira Gandhi. The arrangement here again here was simple, the Syndicate would control the party apparatus and Indira Gandhi would run the administration of the country. The exact same arrangement was made with Shastri, which turned out to be nothing but a success. During the Nehruvian Era it was Nehru who controlled both the aforementioned arenas. With this arrangement in place a clear division of Labour was visible and many scholars are of the opinion that it proved to be more than effective. During the reign of Shastri the country and the congress party alike faced their share of problems. The leadership of Shastri in diffusing the Indo-Pak War of 1965 amidst the economic

crisis gave him a special place in the country's rich history. While the country was facing its biggest crisis since the Indo-China War the congress party was grappling with the rising popularity of state level parties. The state elections of Kerala in 1965, where the CPI won victory made it the first state to form a non-congress government since independence. This certainly called for the rallying of the Congress party comrades who now had to focus on the upcoming general election in 1967. The Syndicate played a crucial role in doing so as they were able to get a clear majority in 1967. When we talk of this division of labour between the Syndicate and the Prime Minister, in theory it seems to be a very sound arrangement. One of the key reasons as to why Shastri was able to get the country out of the economic and military crisis of '65 was that he had no business looking over the performance of the Congress party in the state elections or prepare the strategy for the General elections of '67. He was a strong leader and was able to pay attention to matters that concerned his office and his office only. But this is exactly where we draw the line of distinction between Shastri and Nehru as Prime Minister. Both of them were strong personalities and their party's position in the Lok Sabha was strong but their role as the party leader differed in extremes. On the one hand, Nehru was the undisputed leader of the Congress Party and nobody could question authority over the party comrades. On the other hand the Syndicate was the Kingmaker, while Shastri was Prime Minister not because he was the party leader but because he was the choice of the Syndicate.

The initial years of Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister were comfortable for the Syndicate which is more than evident from the popular nickname ascribed to India's first woman Prime Minister, i.e. '*Gungi Gudiya*' (Dumb Doll).

But the events that followed into the later years of her tenure saw the balance of power shift again within the Congress Party.

To trace the course of history after the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, Morarji Desai expressed his willingness to be the successor of Shastri, but again the Syndicate did not want him in a position that would threaten their authority. They opted to put Indira Gandhi in the seat of Prime Minister instead.

Ramchandra Guha puts into perspective the possible thought process of the Syndicate in appointing the country's first female Prime Minister in his book, '*India after Gandhi*'

*Socially, she shared little with the party bosses –her own friends came from a more rarefied milieu. She could not be certain when they might try to unseat her. Thus she came to rely on the advice of the mandarins around her, who had no political ambitions themselves. But they did have political views to which, in time and for her own reasons, she came to subscribe.<sup>5</sup>*

Following the interpretations of Ramchandra Guha, it can be seen that the Syndicate seemed to be very hopeful of the arrangement to continue, more so of their power to grow even more. But the General Elections of 1967 proved to be a massive blow to the ambitions of The Syndicate. Kumaraswami Kamraj, SK Patil and Atulya Ghosh were only the few shock omissions from the Lok Sabha contingent of 1967. Not just did the top leaders of the Congress lose their respective seats but their staunch supporters also failed to make the cut. In a way, the Syndicate was debased and that presented Indira Gandhi with a golden opportunity to break free from their command. The Elections of '67 become significant not just in shaping the way Indira Gandhi wielded her powers as Prime Minister but also brought political scientists to analyse it as '*A defeat smothered in numerical victory*'. Several events leading up to the Elections of '67 make clear the fact that India's party system was now starting to break out of the cocoon of '*One-Party domination*'. It becomes imperative for us to discuss in detail the factors and events that played a part in shaping India's party system but also had a significant impact on the office of the Prime Minister.

It becomes imperative to invoke the fundamental principle of '*political awakening*' of the masses after the demise of Nehru. Just as Nehru predicted, the idea of vast political freedoms entitled to the Indian population only went on to become a weapon for the masses to keep a check on any arbitrary use of power. The Elections of '67 saw the highest voter turnout since 1951. The sharp rise in the number and popularity of state level political parties further affirms the effective use of political privileges and freedoms by the Indian voters. Under the leadership of the Syndicate the Congress saw an erosion of its popularity stemmed from its nationalist traditions. One of the reasons for the growing distress among the general population against the Congress party was the approach followed by the Syndicate when resolving conflicts between state and national level players of the party apparatus. The Syndicate would always suppress the dissidents and favour the more powerful leaders even in their wrongdoings for a very simple reason, i.e. '*To stay in power themselves.*' Their inept method of dealing with the growing tensions and factionalism within the party apparatus only went on to cause their own demise. They failed to realize that their own electoral base was rooted in the state level and eventually they got debased from their positions when they failed to even get elected to their respective Lok Sabha seats. The factionalism within the Congress Party started to spread and the failure of the Syndicate to deal with it only became a reason for the ever growing count of political parties in the country. Dissidents started to defect on a

regular basis, outcastes of the Congress Party, shunned by the top leadership joined or built new parties. All these events only went on to prove that one of the prime reasons for the growing unpopularity of the Congress was the diminishing ‘party discipline’.

The growth of local and state level parties was not just as a result of the erosion of support for the Congress party. Another marquee reason for the same was the ideological growth of the Indian citizens. Parties adhering to either leftist or rightist ideologies made significant strides, prime examples being that of the Swatantra Party, CPI, the Bhartiya Jan Sangh and the Socialist Party. The greater involvement of the Indian voters in the political process through the extensive range of rights and freedoms entailed to them meant a growth of parties with ideological basis. It would be imperative to invoke the ideas of Lipset and Rokkan in order to establish a stark difference between the origins of the aforementioned parties and that of the Indian National Congress. If we analyse the origins of the Indian National Congress, it would certainly fall under the category of parties originating from territorial cleavages. On the other hand the parties, who formed the opposition parties during this period of ‘one party domination’ of the Congress, fall under the umbrella of parties originating from functional cleavages. Going back to our lesson in history it becomes vital to analyse the state election results of 1967. Congress lost majority in eight states namely, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras and Kerala.

### **The Era of Transition**

The tenure of Indira Gandhi post the ‘67 elections was one of the most important one post-independence. This is because the prevailing conditions revolving around the powers and functions of the office of the Prime Minister of India had changed significantly and were leading up to some of the most important historical events in India’s history, i.e. The Congress Split, the JP Movement and the years of Emergency. In the year 1967, Congress was starting to crumble, courtesy, the reckless decision making of the top leaders of the party apparatus. Congress clearly was not as dominant as it was during the Nehruvian Era. As of now, the prestige of the office of the Prime Minister suffered with the eroding support of the Congress party. The situation was such that the Syndicate only saw one problem in their hindsight, i.e. Morarji Desai. Their solution to the problem was installing their ‘Goongi Gudiya’ as Prime Minister. But there exists a paradox between the arguments laid out in the preceding paragraphs. On one hand Congress was facing erosion of support across the country and lost majority in eight states, but at the same time was able to scrape through the Lok Sabha Elections with a minor numerical advantage. The answer here lies in the strategy followed by the Congress Party going into the general elections of ‘67. In the past the elections were always fought with the tactical ‘issue based politics’ as central to attracting voters. But with time, the increasing factionalism within the party apparatus rendered the top leadership helpless. A tactical shift to ‘personality based politics’ brought home victory for the Congress party. This shift to the latter methodology was bound to happen when the country saw Lal Bahadur Shastri grow in stature and prove to be very popular among the masses, with time. A similar strategy was followed by the Congress party while campaigning for the Lok Sabha elections of 1967. Indira Gandhi who also was popular with the Indian voters was showcased as the Prime Ministerial candidate. At this juncture of the essay it becomes imperative to discuss the importance of personality politics in effecting the office of the Prime Minister of India. According to Duncan Watts;

*“What the leader chooses to make of the office is a matter of personal style and approach. What he or she is able to make of it depends on personal ability and circumstances of the day.”*

Following the ideas of Watts, we must add ‘individual traits’ such as *Style & Ability* to test whether or not the office of the Prime Minister was strong or not. Another factor that goes on to affect the strength of the office of the Prime Minister is ‘*Circumstance*.’<sup>6</sup>

Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister and she did not waste any time to show her rebellious nature to the Syndicate Leaders. She picked her cabinet members without any outside interference. And she soon realized that the Syndicate was powerless and she started acting independently both in policy and party matters. Indira Gandhi’s growing influence within the party was an infringement of the arrangement between her and the Syndicate; at least the latter seemed to think so. Since the Syndicate now, practically had no control over Indira Gandhi whatsoever, they only went on to realise that she was now planning on debasing them completely and eventually take total control over the Congress as well. A conflict between Indira Gandhi and the Syndicate was soon evident when SK Patil and Kamraj regained their position in the parliament through by-elections and went on to take control over the Congress Working Committee. Indira Gandhi could not get many of her supporters to be elected to the CWC. The conflict between the two factions, one led by Indira Gandhi and one by the Syndicate was out in the open. The peak of the conflict between the two was seen during the 1969 Presidential Elections. The Congress Party officially under the control of the Syndicate declared Sanjiva Reddy as their candidate. Indira Gandhi still did not want to go against her party’s decision even though their candidate was

himself a key member of the Syndicate. She had her hands tied but was given a golden opportunity when the then Vice President, VV Giri decided to file the nomination for the Presidential Elections as an independent candidate. Through backroom negotiations Indira Gandhi mobilized support for VV Giri. The closer the elections got, tensions between the two factions grew even more. The Syndicate realised that Indira Gandhi might even come out in support of VV Giri. They made a fatal mistake of having Nijalingappa approach the Opposition leaders and ask them to cast their second preference as Sanjiva Reddy. Indira Gandhi publicized this misstep of the Syndicate and mobilized support in favour of VV Giri. One night before the elections she indirectly declared her support for VV Giri by appealing to the Congress Leaders to ‘Vote according to their conscience.’ The results of the elections came as a massive blow to the already weak Syndicate. Majority of the MPs of Congress defied Sanjiva Reddy and voted for VV Giri, who was elected President in August by a narrow margin. Post the elections, Indira Gandhi called out the Syndicate openly. What followed was the famous 1969 Congress Split. Bipin Chandra traces the course of the events as;

*“In the end, on 12 November, the defeated and humiliated Syndicate took disciplinary action against Indira Gandhi and expelled her from the party for having violated party discipline. The party had finally split with Indira Gandhi setting up a rival organization, which came to be known as Congress (R)—R for Requisitionists. The Syndicate-dominated Congress came to be known as Congress (O)—O for Organization. In the final countdown, 220 of the party’s Lok Sabha MPs went with Indira Gandhi and 68 with the Syndicate. In the All India Congress Committee too 446 of its 705 members walked over to Indira’s side.”<sup>7</sup>*

Even though Indira Gandhi was now free from the shackles of the Syndicate, she did not enjoy an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha. She was dependent on other parties for outside support. The policies framed by her on the lines of socialistic ideas were met with opposition in the lower house, so fresh elections were called for in 1971. A grand alliance was formed in an attempt to dislodge Indira Gandhi from the office of the Prime Minister. The unpopular Syndicate leaders could not gather support for their party, Congress (O) and could only haplessly watch Indira Gandhi and Congress (R) march towards a thumping majority. They won 353/518 seats and even attained a 2/3<sup>rd</sup> majority in the Lok Sabha.

Now if we put the tenures of Indira Gandhi to test we can safely say that she started off as a weak Prime Minister owing to her extremely fragile position in her own party. With time she grew in stature and was able to influence the larger sections of the Congress party. Eventually, the results of the 1971 elections put her in a very dominant position. She was the undisputed leader of her party and her party enjoyed a very strong position in the Lok Sabha. Her personality traits impressed both, leaders of her party and the public. She fulfilled all the requirements to be dominant Prime Minister, which is also evident from the policies she implemented after the Congress Split in 1969, be it the Nationalisation of Banks or the Abolition of Privy purses only helped her grow into the immense powers at her disposal as the Prime Minister of India. Her role in the Indo-Pak War of 1971 also made evident how strong a personality she was. But things weren’t smooth sailing for Indira Gandhi after 1973. The after effects of the Indo-Pak War of 1971 started to show on the country’s economy, the oil crisis of the mid 1970s, rising inflation, deficient monsoons resulting in a drought situation and shortage of grains all contributed to a major crisis faced by Indira Gandhi. The situation was so dire that there were seen waves of protests against Indira Gandhi herself. The slogan ‘Garibi Hatao’, used widely to mobilize the lower sections of the society, now was seen as merely a marketing strategy and not actually a socialistic policy. There was an erosion of support for Indira Gandhi, who seemed to be extremely popular among the Indian Voters at one point in time. Looking back at the elections of ’71, the choice of the Indian voters seems to be more reactionary than logical. Indira proved to be incompetent in dealing with the crisis in front of her. Perception among the citizens was that the government officials were corrupt. These ideas were fueled even further by Indira Gandhi when she started to meddle with the affairs of the Judiciary and the non-political executive, specifically in matters of appointment of important positions. There existed an air of uneasiness across the country and a general resentment against the ruling the party. The JP Movement was a result of these prevailing circumstances. And even though the conflict between the public and the government was not evident yet, it was furthered when Indira Gandhi started showing despotic tendencies well before the JP Movement even took off. It is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion about the origins of the JP Movement. According to Ramchandra Guha, nepotism and corruption remain to be the underlying reasons for a nationwide uproar against the government. On the other hand, Bipin Chandra subscribes to the view that the JP Movement was merely reactionary groups coming together in order to dislodge a common enemy in Indira Gandhi. The argument he lays out in favour of this theory is the mandate given by the Indian voters in the election of ’71. Owing to the varying opinions on the origins of the JP Movement, it would be fitting if we traced the course of events post 1974 to steer this essay into discussing the transition phase of the office of the Prime Minister.

The severe economic condition of the country sparked a wave of protests across the country. The most notable ones, that began in Gujarat and Bihar respectively even developed into a full-fledged movement. In Gujarat protests were led by students against the shortage of essential commodities. The protests began to spread across the state and soon the protests together came to be referred to as the ‘NavNirman Movement’. The movement soon degenerated into violence and the government dealt it with equal amount of force. Lathi Charges and Arrests became very frequent and several opposition parties came out in support of the agitators. The corrupt chief minister of Gujarat, Chimanbai Patel was compelled to resign and President’s rule was imposed on the state in March 1975. The Gujarat assembly was dissolved and fresh elections were called for.

The NavNirman Movement inspired a similar movement to rise in Bihar. The issues protested against were very similar to those in Gujarat, i.e. Government corruption, Inflation, Shortage of essential commodities and inequality of land ownership in rural areas. Again, the movement turned violent with the passage of time. In March 1974, the Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti leading a protest in Patna clashed violently with the police. Soon after the Patna clash the CSS and other resistant groups approached Jay Prakash Narayan to take over the leadership of the movement. Jay Prakash Narayan, who then in political retirement was one of the key figures during the freedom struggle especially the Quit India Movement. Even though in political retirement JP, as he was popularly called, had already publicly voiced his concerns about the government. He agreed to lead the movement on two conditions; The Movement be non-violent and that it not be restricted to just Bihar but spread across the country. The entry of JP gave a massive moral boost to the movement and it soon became popular as the JP Movement. He ushered the ‘total revolution’ on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1974. He called for the state legislatures to resign and the assembly to be dissolved; he called for the agitators to paralyse the government through non-payment of taxes and setting up of parallel governments. The movement soon gained ground and that prompted JP to take a tour of India. On this tour he addressed packed crowds and enlightened the general population about the corrupt practices of the government and encouraged them to dislodge Indira Gandhi in the upcoming elections. A marquee element of this tour was the heavy involvement of the Jan Sangh and the old socialists. Soon JP started to appeal to several opposition parties to join hands with him to put Indira Gandhi out of power and it happened to be that he got support from many opposition parties and he owed this victory to his larger diversified support base. In 1975, on the first anniversary of the movement, JP openly called for the formation of a single front to fight the Congress in all future elections. The next General elections were scheduled for February-March 1976. At this juncture we must understand that the country’s party system was undergoing a transition, from a single party system to a multi-party system. But this transition was not as smooth as it seemed to be if looked at from the time following into the ’76 Elections.

On 12 June 1975, Justice Sinha of the Allahbad High gave the famous ‘Allahbad Court Verdict’. The verdict was against Indira Gandhi and in favour of her political opponent from Allahbad, Raj Narain. The Allahbad verdict stated that Indira Gandhi had indulged in corrupt electoral practices and her election stood invalid. In accordance with the verdict, Indira Gandhi was directed to resign from the post of Prime Minister. But she refused to resign and lodged an appeal in the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the polling in Gujarat also took place and when the results of the same brought yet another setback for Indira Gandhi. The Jan Sangh, affiliated to the Janata Front led by LK Advani was headed for a majority and formed the government. The two aforementioned developments gave a massive boost to the ongoing movement against the Prime Minister. On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1975, the Supreme Court gave a rather controversial order on Indira Gandhi’s appeal. It stated that, until her appeal was heard and a final verdict was given, Mrs. Gandhi could attend the Parliament but couldn’t vote in it. Following this controversial order of the Supreme Court, the agitation against Indira Gandhi swelled even further. JP and the opposition demanded immediate resignation of Indira Gandhi and accused her of clinging on to her corruptly gained office. On 25<sup>th</sup> June 1975, JP announced the commencement of a week-long agitation from 29<sup>th</sup> June, aimed at forcing Indira Gandhi to resign. JP now called on people to hinder the working of the government, police and the bureaucracy. The campaign ended with mass picketing of Indira Gandhi’s residence.

Indira Gandhi’s response to this came on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1975, in the most subtle ways possible. Under the provisions of Article 352, a state of Emergency was declared by President Farukh Ali Ahmed, upon the advice of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi owing to the ‘internal disturbances’ in the country.

Soon, the federal provisions of the constitution were suspended along with the fundamental rights; censorship on the press was also imposed; Opposition members like JP, Morarji Desai and Chandrashekhar who took to streets in protests were detained and at times charged under the ‘Maintenance of Internal Security Act’ (MISA). The Parliament was also rendered ineffective as speeches by opposition members were not allowed to be reported in the press. Indira Gandhi soon made sure that the Youth Congress became important in the overall functioning of the country. Her son Sanjay Gandhi became a vital figure in the decision making process.

Varying opinions have emerged on the reaction of the public upon the declaration of emergency. The likes of Bipin Chandra have laid out certain arguments in favour of a positive reaction of the public. He believes that corruption on all levels was curbed and the public having never experienced an authoritative rule seemed

content with the arrangement. The popularity of Indira Gandhi also seemed to be one of the reasons why the public saw this measure in good light. But that is not the whole story. Indira Gandhi with time became relentless and started losing out on support. Several factors contributed to the diminishing support of Indira Gandhi. Even after an authoritarian rule was put in place, the economic situation did not improve. Furthermore, the cons of censorship placed on civil rights started to affect the daily lives of citizens; the unchecked powers of the police led to widespread abuse of power; the growing Nepotism within the party became a major issue. Sanjay Gandhi became so powerful that he introduced the ‘Four Point Programme’ in line with the ‘20 Point Programme’ introduced by his mother. The despotic means employed in the implementation of the former served as a massive reason for the growing unpopularity of Indira Gandhi.

On 18<sup>th</sup> January 1977, Indira Gandhi announced that elections to the Lok Sabha would take place in the month of March. Opposition members if in prison were released, press censorship was lifted, and civil rights were restored. The very next leaders of four parties, namely; the Jana Sangh, the Bhartiya Lok Dal, the Socialist Party and Congress (O) formed the Janata Party. Jay Prakash Narayan overlooked the turn of these events. Post this, the Janata party campaigned vigorously using the wrong-doings during the state of Emergency as their propaganda machine. The elections were held on 16<sup>th</sup> March and the result was no surprise. The Janata Party marched towards a resounding majority of 330/542 seats while the Congress party led by Indira Gandhi could only muster 153/542 seats. The results came as a massive blow to the Congress party as it lost its grip over the Northern States and were deserted by the Scheduled Caste and Muslim voters who were at a point considered to be their loyal vote banks. As a result, India in 1977 saw the first ever non-Congress government formed at the center with Morarji Desai as Prime Minister. This was the first time a coalition government was voted to power, and at this stage it would be imperative to assess the tenure of Morarji Desai as Prime Minister. The office of Desai was weak from its very inception. The strings attached to his office owing to the burdens of the coalition politics made his functioning very difficult. There were conflicts between several groups within the Janata Party. The secular and socialist leaders did not like the likes of Vajpayee and Advani who followed a Hindu Nationalist Agenda and had roots in the RSS. The underlying problem with the Janata Government was that they joined hands to put Indira Gandhi out of power and never paid much attention to as to how they would run the country when they would come to power. Running a coalition government in a Parliamentary form of government rids the office of the Prime Minister of its strengths. Morarji Desai bore the brunt of several inter-party conflicts and failed to function properly. Several ideological struggles also made sure that any policy decisions even if positive in outlook did not meet desired outcomes. As stated before, a number of parties which differing ideologies had come together and formed a single party to defeat a common enemy. Once their goal of defeating Congress was fulfilled, internal conflicts emerged as they were tasked with governing the country and there, the differences in opinions and ideologies between several ministers and political leaders caused a lot of problems for the proper functioning of the Prime Minister. Here we saw a glimpse of how coalition governments find it difficult to govern. It becomes imperative for us to state again here that this period post the Congress Split following into the JP Movement and the period of Emergency shall be labelled as the ‘The Era of Transition’ for some key reasons such as; One, for the first time Indian history a non-Congress government was elected. Two, for the first time India saw glimpses of coalition politics and its effects. So that in turn establishes one argument stated by me in the beginning of this essay i.e. the party system of India would slowly move away from One party system and towards a multi-party system. And finally, all this would amount to weaken the office of the Prime Minister, as is clearly evident from Morarji Desai’s tenure as Prime Minister. Eventually, he had to resign due to internal conflicts in the Janata Party. Charan Singh was sworn in as Prime Minister and he remained in office till 14th January 1980. Very unfortunately, the Janata Government which came to power with the slogan 'democracy or dictatorship', could not continue for long, due to the internal differences and personal ambitions of the leaders. In the span of three years India saw two different Prime Ministers which clearly reflects how Party politics had affected the strength of the office of the Prime Minister.

### **The Domination of Personality Politics**

In 1980, Elections were called owing to the failing support for Charan Singh. The mandate of the General Elections came against the prevalent tide of coalition politics. The Indian National Congress was voted into majority with by the public a total of 353/529 seats in their favour. The Janata Party now, dissipated and broken up could muster only 31/529 seats. Indira Gandhi swore in as Prime Minister yet again and brought back the same old tradition of a formidable center of power in form of the office of the Prime Minister. Again here exists a paradox in the turn of events post the 1980 Elections. The Indian Voters were showing signs of moving towards a rigid multi-party system with the inception of the coalition era. But in a true sense the transition to the present multi-party system was not complete. The theory of Watts comes to explain the voting pattern yet again. The country had already been conditioned to follow the pattern of Personality Politics. Indira Gandhi was opportune in finding the Janata Government incompetent in running the country. She capitalized on their failures and apologized to the public for her mistakes during the period of emergency. The public also found it

fitting to place her in a position from where she could possibly turn the country's fortunes around, which was certainly not possible with a coalition government in place. So again the importance of personality politics became paramount in deciding the fate of the office of the Prime Minister. Indira Gandhi with a strong position both in the Lok Sabha and her own party enjoyed yet another tenure as a powerful Prime Minister. It was not until her demise in 1984 that the country was rid of a strong personality wielding the office of the Prime Minister. In that case, Rajiv Gandhi stood up to the task of filling the shoes of her mother. The public also accepted him as an astute leader when giving their mandate in the 1984 Elections. The INC won 404/512 seats, the highest count any party to have ever achieved in India's 70 year long history. Rajiv Gandhi just like her mother was a bold personality and wielded his office with much authority.

We establish the argument in favour of personality traits effecting voting trends and being the answer to the paradox of coalition politics not turning into a full-fledged battleground for power, post the JP movement. After the death of Rajiv Gandhi, the country was left with no leaders who could command both the office of the Prime Minister and their party apparatus with the strength of their abilities.

### **The Era of Coalition Politics**

The post 1989 era has been often called the Era of Coalition Politics. The role of the Indian Prime Minister thus started changing towards the end of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The decline in the popularity of Congress, but more so the rise of several regional level and even national level political parties, particularly the Janta Dal, the Bhartiya Janata Party, Bhartiya Samajwadi Party and the Left Parties. All these parties together began acting as an input for such a change. After having remained a dominant party in the India's political arena, the Congress found it difficult to maintain its strength and role in the era of coalition politics. Under the impact of two major factors, the opening of the era of hung assemblies and the emergence of a real multi-party system with several powerful political parties together combined to give rise to several changes and finally completeing the transition to a rigid multi-party system. In 1991, no party got a majority in the Lok Sabha. The Congress emerged as the single largest party and consequently formed a minority government with its dependence on outside support from some parties. This government was led by PM Narsimha Rao and he was in a position to complete his tenure of 5 years but he wielded his office under tremendous pressure of coalition politics. However, thereafter, an era of coalition politics emerged in India and it had a huge impact on the office of the Prime Minister. Thereafter, the 1996 and 1998 elections produced hung Lok Sabhas and between 1996-98 four governments were formed and each one a coalition government. In the 1996 elections, BJP came to be the single largest party with 161 seats. It formed the government, but it could last only thirteen days. Thereafter, a coalition of several parties was formed with the name United Front and it formed a coalition government with HD Dev Gowda as the Prime Minister. This government was dependent on the Congress for remaining in power and it could last only for about a year. Thereafter, a second United Front upon the support of the Congress. This government could last only a few months. During this time, limitations of the office of the Prime Minister increased substantially and turned into a relatively weak office. In 1998, fresh General Elections were held. However, again the Lok Sabha came to be a Hung Assembly. BJP emerged as the single largest party with 182 seats. Its alliance got a total of 253 seats. A BJP led coalition government was formed with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Prime Minister. The government was dependent for support on parties like TDP and TMC. It was also a weak government and could last only 13 months. In 1999, the BJP led NDA coalition came to power under the Prime Ministership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Though he stayed in power till 2004, the compulsions of coalition politics were a source of limitation on their effective working. If we try and asses all the Prime Ministers during this span of time, it can be safely said that, coalition politics was a little too overwhelming for them and the office of the Prime Minister. No Prime Minister during this era can be considered as a strong Prime Minister. The office of the Prime Minister altogether had to suffer from it and would for another decade remain in its own shadow. In 2004, Congress led UPA coalition government came to power with Dr. Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister. He got his office because Sonia Gandhi- the leader of the Congress which was the largest partner of the UPA coalition decided against holding the office. Finally, it was decided that Manmohan Singh would be Prime Minister. This factor and several others viz. weak position of the new Prime Minister in his own party, existence of two centers of power – Mrs. Sonia Gandhi as the Chairperson of the UPA and Dr. Manmohan Singh as the head of the UPA government, dependence of UPA government on outside support of CPM, CPI and Left Parties and several other regional parties increased their powers and they always tried to get the maximum out of their coalition regardless of how it was hampering the country's administration. Political Corruption and slow decision making had become a normal thing. In 2009, the UPA again came to power with an increased strength in the Lok Sabha. However, this UPA government under the Prime Ministership of Dr. Manmohan Singh continued to suffer from weak leadership, compulsions and pressures of coalition government, weak administration, political corruption, slow decision making, a sort of policy paralysis and the increased negative role played by several regional parties with their narrow bigoted demands at the root of all these problems. There were instances of attempts at regionalization of decision

making and the distribution of portfolios among ministers under pressures and demands of regional parties had become a norm. While we point out the negatives of coalition politics it would be vital to understand that the ten years for which Manmohan Singh was in office, the arrangement put in place by the UPA Coalition under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi with two pivots of power existed is very similar to the time after the demise of Jawaharlal Nehru. The country lacked a leader who could control both party politics and policy making at the same time. Hence, it was seen to be fitting both in the interest of the nation and the INC that there existed two centers of power. And that worked well for them as they saw a decade in power with a steadily growing economy and rid of political turbulence as opposed to the time adjacent to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Sonia Gandhi catered to the needs and demands of the parties Congress was allied to while Manmohan Singh took charge of the policy making.

### **The Present Scenario**

It was not until 2014, that the ‘Modi Wave’ brought back the air of personality politics. Narendra Modi then Chief Minister of Gujarat, was projected by the BJP as their Prime Ministerial candidate. He was an astute leader and served up a very strong reputation owing to his 13 year long reign as Chief Minister of the ever prospering state of Gujarat. There are several reasons for the thumping majority won by the NDA Coalition in the 2014 General Elections, one very crucial one being the prolonged Coalition Era stretched across 25 years, the public seemed to have been frustrated by the slow and tardy decision making process caused by the hindrances of coalition politics. Narendra Modi enjoyed a strong position in both the Lok Sabha and his own party and hence wielded his office with remarkable strength. Certain bold policy decisions such as the Demonetisation and the GST Act made evident his stronghold over both the party apparatus and the executive wing of the government. His personality has been very appealing to the masses and the BJP is going into the 2019 General Elections again, projecting him as the undisputed leader of the country to gather votes. On the flipside though, several developments have brought to light the possibility of a United Front in name of the ‘Mahagathbandhan’ standing in opposition to NDA alliance. The 2019 General Elections become even more vital in deciding the fate of the Office of the Prime Minister, mostly because the results of the 2014 General Elections, the trend of coalition government was written off by the public amidst the thriving multi-party system of the country.

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