

Opposition's fate a litmus test for future of democracy

DH deccanherald.com/opinion/opposition-s-fate-a-litmus-test-for-future-of-democracy-1231266.html

June 26, 2023

If the Congress makes the opposition sound effete, the BJP makes dominance sound hegemonic. Each destroys the creative idea of opposition in their own singular way



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- JUN 26 2023, 10:04 IST
- UPDATED: JUN 26 2023, 10:04 IST



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with Bihar CM and JD(U) chief Nitish Kumar, Shiv Sena leader Sanjay Raut and others during the opposition parties' meeting, in Patna, Friday, June 23, 2023. Credit: PTI Photo

The word 'opposition' has become a strange term, pregnant with contrary meanings. It conveys a challenge, a difference, a contrariness, in fact, a roadblock.

Yet the presence of an opposition creates the logic of democracy, and the celebration of difference so critical to the democratic imagination. The very idea of opposition conveys an anticipation of drama, debate, and difference. Yet, often the word can be

misconstrued, and the 'opposition' becomes an object of contempt. One senses this in the recent scenarios around the Patna meeting to announce a united opposition to the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee, warned that the opposition also belongs to Bharat Mata, and that people in the opposition were citizens of India. She was responding to the BJP's attempt to turn the opposition into an alien force, into a series of 'Urban Naxals'. One realises that the majoritarian nature of the regime has turned the idea of the 'opposition' into a Judas concept, a treasonous idea in the age of consensus.

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In fact, the word 'opposition' conveys a contrary unity, a competing vision. It is this sense of vision that adds power to politics. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi summed it up in his own childlike way. He said "The battle is between the Bharat Jodo and the Bharat Todo party". Gandhi summed it up like a children's crusade, but his scenario is simplistically inviting.

BJP leader and Union minister Smriti Irani retaliates by claiming that the very sense of a collective opposition is an inherent statement of weakness, a confession that the Congress alone is not strong enough to defeat the BJP. The opposition is a word, a lament, a confession of defeat, long before the 2024 election has begun.

BJP leader and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis adds that the word opposition is decadent, a nostalgia of old party hands and hacks, reliving canned glory.

The reference, of course, is not just to Gandhi, but to Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, Janata Dal (United) leader and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, and Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Lalu Prasad, all of whom are seen as mimics of the Congress by pursuing dynastic politics.

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Watching Prasad and Kumar standing together tired and listless makes you wonder how they were one-time associates of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP). JP still oozes a sense of idealism, a drama of dissent, and courage that Kumar and Prasad seem to lack. There is almost an autism, in the way they repeat the politics.

One must confess that the opposition looks distraught, scattered like a collection of quarrelsome chickens. The way the BJP presents itself before the 2024 election has shades of the surreal. The BJP announces the future as a *fait accompli*. It sees Modi as a juggernaut, creating an act of robotic uniformity, while the opposition looks effete and anarchic.

The way both opposition and BJP talk politics devalues both politics and the idea of the opposition. The opposition is still a potential idea rehearsing future roles. It's a collection of regional parties attempting to get together. There is little sense of national or ideological unity. The Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) still act like quarrelling factions, a continuous act of bickering, which shows little sense of leadership. If the Congress makes the opposition sound effete, the BJP makes dominance sound hegemonic. Each destroys the creative idea of opposition in their own singular way.

One must consider this situation. The sheer absence of opposition unity creates an empty politics, and the creative power of dissent and difference is ignored. One realises that the opposition is not an articulation of future unity, but an egotistic expression of interest in the immediacy of power. A creative opposition is something even astrologers would not dare predict.

This problem must be taken seriously. It signals more than the emptiness of current politics. It signals a crisis of democracy. One senses the irony of electoral democracy corroding the normative vision of democracy. This has happened in five different ways: firstly, through a devaluation of citizenship as the debate in Assam showed. Secondly, through a majoritarian contempt for dissent as anti-national. Thirdly, the logic of number overwhelms the normative content of democracy. Fourthly, through a normalisation of violence in electoral politics. Finally, the situation pretends that the opposition is the new strawman of Indian politics. It is in this sense that the opposition and the fate of the opposition becomes a litmus test for the future of democracy after 2024. Banerjee is right, the idea of "no opposition" is a sure sign of impending fascism. Yet, how does one break through such a *fait accompli*.

In a simple sense, the pot must stop calling the kettle black. Opposition parties must suppress their own bullyboy instincts, and this refers to Prasad or Banerjee. More critically, the Congress must allow a more creative space to the younger generation, and to professionals such as Shashi Tharoor. The Congress needs to understand that dissent was part of its own pluralistic myth. Gandhi must allow for a competitive politics within. The genetic hypocrisy of the Congress does not make it an exemplary proponent of oppositional dynamics.

One must see that the gossip of immediacy can be distracting. It is not a question of the latest faction, but a wider cultural question. In a country, where dissent is on its way out, and conformity seems to rhyme with the current authoritarianism, one senses whether it's the BJP, the TMC or the CPI(M), none of them look at dissent differently. Dissent must be revived culturally for the idea of opposition to sparkle. Unfortunately, this seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. Each of us must learn to minimise the Modi, the Trump or the Erdogan in us.

The sadness is that in moments of crisis we go for the quick fix. A quick fix democracy is a sure-fire way to fascism. The current story of an effete opposition must be tackled differently. As a quiet observer put it, one begins when one faces the Modi in all of us.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed above are the author's own. They do not necessarily reflect the views of DH.