Political Parties, 1947–1964: The Congress

India is virtually the only postcolonial nation to sustain a system of parliamentary government for over fifty years after independence. It is, of course, true that throughout the Nehru years Congress was dominant politically and retained power at the Centre and in almost all the states. But, simultaneously, a multi-party system based on free competition among parties and strong parliamentary institutions also developed from the beginning. The nature and working of the party system in place at the time of independence with several political parties—the Congress, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party and the Bharatiya Jan Sangh—functioning actively and successfully in 1951–52 was crucial to the development of parliamentary democracy in India.

All the major political parties were national or all-India in character, in their structure, organization, programmes and policies, even when their political bases were limited to specific areas or classes and sections of society. They had national objectives, took up significant all-India issues, sustained an all-India leadership and put forward programmes concerned with the social, economic and political development of the country as a whole.

Though the Opposition parties remained individually quite weak compared to Congress in terms of mass support as also seats in parliament and the state legislatures, they were quite active and politically did not play just a peripheral role. They vigorously campaigned for alternative sets of economic and political policies. More significantly, non-Congress candidates polled more votes than the Congress in the general elections of 1951–52, 1957 and 1962; and, despite the first-past-the-post electoral system, they captured 26 per cent of the Lok Sabha seats in 1952, 25 per cent in 1957 and 28 per cent in 1962. They fared even better in the state assemblies where their strength was 32 per cent of the seats in 1952, 35 per cent in 1957, and 40 per cent in 1962. What is even more important, they put considerable pressure on the government and the ruling party and subjected them to consistent criticism. In practice, they also wielded a great deal of influence on public policies, in fact, quite out of proportion to their size.

Opposition parties remained weak in this period because of their inability to unite. They found they had more in common with one or the other wing of Congress than with each other. This was not accidental because except for the communal and casteist parties all the other Opposition parties had before 1947 been part of the national movement and the Congress. It was only when the left and right parties could unite, formally or informally, that they could defeat the Congress in 1977 and 1989.

The Indian National Congress was then the most important political organization in India at independence and, in fact, throughout the Nehru era. There was no alternative to it on the horizon. It enjoyed immense prestige and legitimacy as the leader and heir of the national movement. Its reach was national; it covered the entire subcontinent. Its social base extended from the metropolitan cities to the remotest of villages and from the big capitalists to the rural poor. Congress gave the country a stable government; it was a major instrument of the political stability

India enjoyed for several decades.

It is axiomatic among historians and political scientists that after independence Congress was transformed from a movement into a party. But this is a half-truth, for no real break occurred immediately after 15 August 1947. In fact, this was the problem that Congress faced. In the changed circumstances it could no longer be the leader of a mass movement; but could it become a modern party for forming a government, and yet retain the character of a broad coalition for the purposes of nation-building? As a party, it had to have a certain organizational cohesion; this it secured by introducing, at Sardar Patel's initiative, a provision that no person belonging to any other political party or group, which had its own constitution and organizational structure, could be its member. (It had permitted this before 1947 when the Congress Socialists and the Communists were its members, even while forming their own parties.) But it retained its ideological and programmatic diversity and openness as also a certain organizational looseness.

The Congress Socialists misunderstood the emerging character of Congress and assumed, especially after the Patel amendment, that it was no longer to be broad-based and was being transformed into a right-wing bourgeois party with a definite ideological and programmatic commitment to the capitalist path of development. Given these perceived differences, the Socialists decided to leave Congress. This was certainly a blow to the broad-based character of the party.

Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other hand, was convinced that it was both possible and necessary to retain the all-embracing consensual character of Congress and that without its leadership the country would neither be politically stable, nor capable of economic and social development. He was therefore unwilling to divide the party along left–right lines and stayed with Congress as did a large number of the Congress Socialists who saw Congress and Nehru as more effective instruments of socialism and social change. However, realizing that the departure of the Socialists would adversely affect the socialist aspirations of Congress, he made, as we shall see, several attempts to bring them back into the party or at least to get their cooperation in his nation-building efforts. He also constantly strove to reform Congress and give it a left turn, however arduous the task. He also adopted a reconciliatory approach towards political opponents other than the communalists.

Congress did, of course, become after 1947 a distinct political party, competing with other parties for political power but it did not become a monolithic party. It retained its amorphous and national consensual character with a great deal of ideological flexibility and vagueness. Though the party observed a certain degree of discipline, its functioning and decision-making remained democratic and open. There was still a great deal of debate within it as also tolerance of different viewpoints, tendencies and open dissent. The views of the party members got reflected in the All India Congress Committee (AICC) and the annual sessions of the party. The district and provincial party organizational structures also functioned effectively and conveyed to the leadership the different points of view prevailing in the party. Important in this respect was the role of Nehru who functioned as a democrat inside the party as also in relation to the Opposition parties.

Congress also remained sensitive to and functioned as the medium for the reconciliation,

accommodation and adjustment of diverse and divergent class, sectional and regional interests, as it had done during the period of the anti-imperialist struggle. It also had the capacity to contain, compromise and reconcile different and competing points of view within the party. While placating the propertied and socially dominant groups, it was simultaneously able to appeal to the poor and the deprived. It was also able to accommodate new social and political forces as they gradually emerged and entered the political arena, especially as the left parties failed to represent and mobilize them.

This all-embracing, inclusive character Congress was able to retain in part because of its inheritance in the national movement but largely because of the Nehruvian notion that national consolidation, democracy and social change required the active or passive consent of the overwhelming majority of the people.

During the Nehru era, Congress remained basically a party of the Centre or middle with a left orientation—in other words, a left-of-centre party—though it had right and left minorities at its flanks. Broadly, it stood for nationalism, economic development, social justice, redistribution of wealth and equalization of opportunities encompassed by the broad idea of democratic socialism. As a centrist party it had three important features. First, the Opposition parties, other than the communal parties, were able to influence it through their mass agitations or through like-minded groups within it, for there always existed inside Congress groups which reflected the positions of the Opposition parties. Second, this conciliatory attitude led to the Opposition parties being open to absorption. Congress was able to absorb the social base, cadres, programmes and policies of the Opposition parties, and to pacify and co-opt popular movements through concessions and conciliation. Third, the Opposition parties, both of the left and the right, tended to define themselves in extreme terms in order to prevent their cadres and followers—and even leaders—from being co-opted or absorbed by Congress. This happened whenever the Socialist and Communist parties adopted realistic demands or followed a non-antagonistic approach towards Congress and its policies. But these extreme positions also had negative consequences for the parties concerned— they tended to isolate them further from public opinion and also made them vulnerable to splits.

Leadership of Party versus Government

A major problem that Congress had to decide on as a party at the very outset was what would be the precise relationship between the leadership of the party and that of the government. In November 1946, Nehru joined the interim government and resigned from the party presidentship on the ground that the two roles of the leader of the government and the president of the party could not be combined. His successor as Congress president, J.B. Kripalani, however, demanded that the president of the party and the CWC should have a direct role in government policy-making and that all government decisions should be taken in consultation with them.

Nehru and Sardar Patel and other leaders holding government positions did not agree with Kripalani. They said that the proceedings and the papers of the government were secret and could not be divulged to persons outside the government. The party, they argued, should lay down

general long-term policies and goals but should not interfere with the specific problems of governance. The government, in their view, was constitutionally accountable to the elected legislature; it could in no case be made accountable to the party. In essence they argued for the autonomy of the parliamentary wing and and even its supremacy over the party in so far as government affairs were concerned.

Kripalani would not agree to this virtual subordination of the party to the government and, feeling frustrated by the refusal of the government to consult him on several important issues, resigned from the party presidentship in November 1947 without completing his two-year term. Explaining his resignation to the AICC delegates, he said: 'How is the Congress to give the Government its active and enlightened cooperation unless its highest executive or its popularly chosen head is taken into full confidence on important matters that affect the nation.'[1]

Kripalani was succeeded in office for one year by Rajendra Prasad and subsequently for two years by B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya. Neither of the two asserted the principle of organizational supremacy or even equality and confined the functions of the party president to organizational affairs. But before the issue could be clinched, the Nehru–Tandon tussle over organizational control intervened once again and raked up this question among others.

A crisis involving differences over policies and party and government management broke out in 1950 over the question of Purshottamdas Tandon's presidentship of the Congress. With the Communists leaving the Congress in 1945 and from the end of 1947 adopting a totally hostile attitude towards Nehru and the government, and the Socialists parting ways with Congress in 1948, the radical forces in Congress were weakened. The conservative forces then decided to assert themselves and to make a bid for control over the party and the policies of the government. But before we take up this crisis, we may very briefly deal with the tension resulting from the Nehru–Patel differences.

Nehru and Patel

Sardar Patel has been much misunderstood and misrepresented. Some have used him to attack the Nehruvian vision and policies; others have made him out to be the archetypal rightist. Both have been wrong. Patel was undoubtedly the main leader of the Congress right wing. But his rightist stance has often been grossly misinterpreted. Like Nehru, he fully shared the basic values of the national movement: commitment to democracy and civil liberties, secularism, independent economic development, social reform and a pro-poor orientation. He stood for the abolition of landlordism but through payment of compensation. A staunch opponent of communalism, he was fully committed to secularism. In 1946–47 he took ruthless action against the rioters. In 1950 he declared:

> Ours is a secular State. We cannot fashion our policies or shape our conduct in the way Pakistan does it. We must see that our secular ideals are actually realised in practice . . . Here every Muslim should feel that he is an Indian citizen and has equal rights as an Indian citizen. If we cannot make him feel like this, we shall not be

worthy of *our heritage and of our country*.[2]

He was also utterly intolerant of nepotism and corruption. Patel's conservatism, however, found expression with regard to the questions of class and socialism. Before 1947, he had opposed the Socialists and the Communists. After 1947, he argued successfully both for stimulus to private enterprise and the incorporation of the right of property as a fundamental right in the constitution. Thus, the right-wing stance of Patel was basically a matter of social ideology. But his positive approach to capitalism and the capitalists was combined with total personal integrity and an austere lifestyle. He collected money from the rich for the national movement but none dare offer him a paisa for his own or his family's use.

In fact, the relationship between Nehru and Patel was highly complex. Historians and political scientists have generally tended to emphasize the differences between the two and overlooked what they had in common. Certainly, their differences and disputes were real, as also significant, but they have been exaggerated to the extent of falsifying history.

Patel and Nehru had temperamental as well as ideological differences. After 1947, policy differences on several questions cropped up between them. The two differed on the role and authority of the prime minister, the manner in which the riots of 1947 were to be handled and the relations with Pakistan. The election of Purshottamdas Tandon as Congress president in 1950 created a wide breach between them. Nehru opposed, though unsuccessfully, Patel's view that the right to property should be included among the Fundamental Rights in the constitution. Several times their differences on questions of policy led to near breaches and offers of resignation from the government by one or the other. A certain tension was always present between the two.

Yet, the two continued to stick and pull together and there was no final parting of ways. This was because what united them was more significant and of abiding value than what divided them. Also, they complemented each other in many ways: one was a great organizer and able administrator, the other commanded immense mass support and had a wide social and developmental perspective. If anything, Patel buttressed Nehru's role even while challenging it in some respects. Besides, there was considerable mutual affection and respect for each other and each recognized the indispensability of the other. Gandhiji's death also made a difference; the two realized that it had made their cooperation all the more necessary. Both arrived at an agreement through the process of frank discussion on almost every major government policy decision. Patel would argue his case, sometimes strongly, would win it sometimes, but when he could not, he would invariably yield to Nehru. Throughout Patel remained Nehru's loyal colleague, assuring him of complete support for his policies. After Gandhiji's death, he repeatedly described Nehru as his 'leader'. On 14 November 1948—Nehru's birthday—he was to say: 'Mahatma Gandhiji named Pandit Nehru as his heir and successor. Since Gandhiji's death we have realised that our leader's judgement was correct.'[3] And Nehru reciprocated: 'The Sardar has been a tower of strength; but for his affection and advice I would not have been able to run the State.'[4]

Purshottamdas Tandon versus Nehru

The struggle between the right wing of the party and Nehru came to a head in August 1950 over the question of the election of the party president and lasted for over one year. The struggle involved questions of policy and ideology; but it was also important because the new office-bearers would play a decisive role in the nomination of the party candidates in the coming general elections.

The three candidates who contested the election for the party presidentship were Purshottamdas Tandon, supported by Patel, J.B. Kripalani, supported by Nehru, and Shankarrao Deo. Nehru was opposed to Tandon because of his overall conservative social, economic and political outlook. He made it clear that he would find it difficult to continue as a member of the Congress Working Committee or even of the government if Tandon were elected. Supporters of Tandon, on the other hand, hoped for his election 'to curb' Nehru, to change his foreign, economic and social policies, especially his policies towards Pakistan and the Hindu Code Bill.

In a closely fought election on 29 August 1950, Tandon won with 1,306 votes, with Kripalani getting 1,092 and Deo 202 votes. Subsequently, Tandon packed the CWC and the Central Election Committee with his men. After a great deal of internal debate and tussle, a large number of Congressmen, led by Kripalani, resigned from the party in June 1951 and formed the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party, even though Nehru and Azad advised against the step.

Nehru now decided to give battle. Regarding the Congress as indispensable (Patel having died on 15 December 1950), he decided to intervene directly in party affairs. While keen to preserve party unity, he was not willing to let the right wing dominate the party or the coming election process. With great skill and determination and bringing into play his considerable political talents, he got the AICC to pass resolutions fully endorsing his social, economic and foreign policies. Then, on 6 August 1951, he resigned from the Congress Working Committee and the Central Election Committee asking Congressmen to choose 'which viewpoint and outlookare to prevail in the Congress—Tandon's or mine'.[5] There was no doubt as to what the Congressmen's choice would be, especially in view of the coming elections which could not be won without Nehru's leadership and campaigning. Instead of accepting Nehru's resignation, Tandon, fully realizing that Nehru's political position was stronger than his own or his friends', decided to himself resign. The AICC accepted Tandon's resignation on 8 September and elected Nehru to the Congress presidency. Nehru accepted the AICC decision, even though he was in principle opposed to the prime minister being the party president. But then he had already said earlier that 'necessity might compel' him to do so 'in special circumstances'.[6]

The entire episode led to little bitterness as Tandon resigned 'with grace and little recrimination' and Nehru graciously asked Tandon to join the Working Committee under his leadership. The offer was immediately accepted by Tandon. Nehru also asked the dissidents to rejoin the party, and several of them, including Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, did so.

Nehru now emerged as the unchallenged leader of the party— the leader who had the final word in the party as also the government and he enjoyed this position till his death in 1964. Though he failed to bring Kripalani and many other rebels back to the party, he succeeded in maintaining the pluralist, consensual as also the left-of-centre character of the Congress.

Another aspect of the conflict between Nehru and Tandon was connected to the relationship between the party organization and the parliamentary party and the government, which had cropped up earlier during, Kripalani's presidency. After his election as Congress president, Tandon had again raised the issue of the party control over the government and he and his supporters had declared that the prime minister and his cabinet must carry out the mandate given by the party and be responsible to it for the carrying out of policies. However, Tandon's resignation and Nehru's presidency confirmed the prominent role of the prime minister and the cabinet in the formulation and carrying out of the government policies; the party president and the Congress Working Committee were to concentrate on the organizational aspects of the party. Though Nehru never again became the president of the party after 1953, there was no conflict between the party and the government in his lifetime. After Nehru too, it has been widely accepted that in a parliamentary democracy where the executive is directly or indirectly elected by the people, there cannot be two centres of power and the real state power has inevitably to reside in the parliamentary wing.

But the situation in India in this respect is not like that in Britain or the US, where the party leadership plays a subsidiary role. In Congress the party president matters much more. The party plays an important role in formulating policies and in selecting the candidates for the state and parliamentary elections. Also, in a vast country like India with a largely illiterate population, the ruling party and its political workers are needed to act as links between the government and the people, to convey popular grievances to the government leaders and to explain the government policies to the people. The party alone can guarantee the proper implementation of government policies and provide a check on the bureaucracy. For example, a proper implementation of land reforms could have been achieved through an active and alive party.

Unfortunately, even while realizing the importance of the party, Nehru and his colleagues neglected the organization and failed to assign its cadre proper tasks, as also to give them their due honour and importance. Instead, there was a certain devaluing and atrophying of the party and party work. Everybody who mattered in the party wanted to be in parliament or state legislatures and then occupy ministerial chairs. Ministers and legislators took up party work only when pushed out from ministerial and legislative positions, and they often did that too so that they could manoeuvre themselves back into parliamentary positions. N. Sanjiva Reddy, who left the chief ministership of Andhra to become the president of the party, was to publicly remark that 'a junior ministership in a state government offered greater satisfaction than presidency of the Congress party'.[7]

At the same time, that the party still mattered is confirmed by the fact that almost every prime minister after Nehru either tried to have a henchman or a sycophant as the party president or herself/himself assumed the party presidency.

Intra-Congress Rivalry

Even in the early years there were signs that Congress was gradually beginning to lose touch with the people and its standards beginning to decline. A certain tendency towards deterioration is

perhaps inevitable in a ruling party but the deterioration and decline should remain within reasonable bounds. This was certainly the case with the Congress in the early years after independence; but the erosion of the party values and standards was still worrisome. There were certain tendencies in the party which were fraught with danger.

There was, as a political scientist said, 'increasing corruption, disillusionment, and loss of *elan* in the Congress Party',[8] or, as Nehru bemoaned as early as 1948, 'the progressive collapse of the morale and idealistic structure that we had built up'.[9] A patronage system was initiated especially in the rural areas leading to the emergence of political brokers and middlemen and vote banks. Factions, factionalism and factional intrigues and disputes, often based on personal and group interests, though sometimes involving ideological and policy differences, emerged, leading even to nondemocratic functioning at the lower levels of the organization and tarnishing the image of the party. Intense rivalry and conflict between the organization men and ministerialists in the states led to intraparty conflicts, with the former often behaving as an Opposition party, their major political objective being to dethrone the ministerialists and to occupy their seats. This tended to create among the people the image of the Congress as a party of office-seekers.

Above all, there was the increasing loss of idealism and neglect of ideology, especially as concerns social welfare and social transformation. The net result was that the Congress increasingly lost touch with the people and it no longer appealed to the intelligentsia and the younger people and was therefore unable to recruit the best of them into the party. Most of the idealist youth preferred to join the Opposition parties. The Congress was thereby failing to train a new generation of leaders to replace those thrown up by the national movement. The deterioration was beginning to affect all political parties but it affected the Congress to a much greater extent, it being the ruling party.

Nehru was, of course, aware of this state of affairs in the country and in the Congress. In a mood of disillusionment, despair and despondency, he wrote in 1948: 'It is terrible to think that we may be losing all our values and sinking into the sordidness of opportunist politics.' In 1949: 'Our standards have fallen greatly. Indeed, we have hardly any standards left except not to be found out.' And then, again in 1950: 'We have lost something, the spirit that moves and unless we recapture that spirit, all our labour will yield little profit.'[10] In 1957 he told the Congress MPs: The Congress Party is weak and getting weaker . . . Our strong point is the past. Unless we get out of our present rut, the Congress Party is doomed.'[11]

Unfortunately, Nehru was no party organizer or reformer nor did he and other tall leaders working in the government have time to devote to party organization. The important work of building the party and toning it up were neglected during the years of Nehru's total dominance of the party and the government. In fact, Nehru was compelled to rely on the state party 'bosses' for running the party machine. Nevertheless, being very much an ideologue, he made several major attempts to keep the party anchored ideologically and politically to its socialist and idealist moorings.

The Socialists and the Congress

The departure of the Socialists had weakened the radical forces in Congress and the space vacated by them was being increasingly filled by vested interests—landlords, rich peasants, and even princes. Nehru realized that Congress had been weakened ideologically by the absence of the Socialists and that he was gradually being hemmed in by conservative modes of thinking. At the same time he also felt that the Congress was indispensable and that it would be wrong and counter-productive to either divide or leave it. The answer, therefore, was to reform and improve a united Congress party despite its many weaknesses.

Nehru, therefore, tried several times to bring the Socialists back into the Congress or to at least get their cooperation in the implementation of a developmental and egalitarian agenda. He did not simultaneously woo the Communists for they were organizationally, politically and ideologically on a completely different track from that of the Congress. But he did try, with some success, to bring the Communists into the mainstream of parliamentary politics. The Socialists on the other hand, Nehru felt, had the same principles and objectives as he had. Moreover, he had a great personal regard and affection for several Socialist leaders, especially Jayaprakash Narayan, who was close enough to him for years to address him as 'Bhai' (brother).

His first attempt to bring the Socialists back into the Congress was in 1948 itself when he expressed his distress at the growing distance from them, which, he said, was 'not good either for us [the Congress] or the Socialist Party, and certainly not good either for the country'.[12] But the Socialists were still quite angry with and critical of Nehru. Jayaprakash, for example, wrote to Nehru in December 1948: 'You want to go towards socialism, but you want the capitalists to help in that.'[13] He also told Nehru in March 1949 that the proposed legislation outlawing strikes in the essential services was 'an ugly example of growing Indian fascism'.[14]

Nehru in turn felt that the Socialists 'continue to show an amazing lack of responsibility and constructive bent of mind. They seem to be all frustrated and going mentally to pieces.'[15]

Another effort by Nehru in 1951 to improve relations with the Socialists once again met with a rebuff. Believing that Nehru was shielding and supporting reactionary forces, Jayaprakash Narayan once again publicly denounced 'Nehru's naked, open fascism' and declared that his government was 'following faithfully in the footsteps of Hitler in their dealings with labour'.[16]

After winning the general elections in 1952 Nehru made his most serious effort to work together with the Socialists, hoping to build a broad political front to promote economic development and strengthen the left trend within the Congress. In 1957, he asked the Socialists to cooperate with the Congress; he also hoped to bring Jayaprakash into the cabinet. In response, Jayaprakash wanted the Congress to adopt a radical programme framed by him before he and the Socialists joined it. His 14-point programme included specific constitutional amendments, administrative and land reforms and nationalization of banks, insurance and mines.

Nehru was in agreement with many of Jayaprakash's fourteen points, but he refused to enter into a prior commitment. If he could have formulated and persuaded his party to accept and implement such a full-scale radical programme he would not have needed Socialist cooperation. This support was needed precisely so that he could do so after strengthening the left trend in the

Congress. Implementation of a radical programme would be the result of the Socialists rejoining the Congress but not a condition to be met prior to their rejoining. Nehru was prepared to strengthen the radical forces inside the Congress and not split the party in order to accommodate the Socialists. He was convinced that the Congress and the government had to go step by step towards radical transformation, that he had to build a larger societal consensus for taking steps towards socialism, that specific steps and their timing were to be determined pragmatically, and that he needed Socialist support precisely to achieve all this. But Jayaprakash could also not resile from his position for he was afraid that that would lead to a split in his own party.

From now on, while the dominant section of the Socialists continued to be convinced that Nehru and the Congress were committed to conservative policies, Nehru became increasingly contemptuous of the Socialists and felt that he would have to implement his socialist agenda alone, with the help of the left wing of the Congress and without the aid of the Socialists. His personal relations with Jayaprakash also deteriorated as he felt that the latter 'hates the Congress so much as to prefer the devil to it'.[17] With every passing year the relations between the Congress and Nehru and the Socialists went on becoming more acrimonious. In October 1956, Nehru wrote in a personal letter that Jayaprakash was saying and writing 'things which have little to do with socialism and which have much to do with nonsense'.[18] He also felt that Jayaprakash was, in the words of S. Gopal, 'willing to join forces with any group in order to defeat the Congress'. More specifically he accused Jayaprakash of supporting the Swatantra Party and encouraging the Hindu communalists. Jayaprakash in turn accused Nehru of 'having deteriorated from a national leader to a partisan of the Congress'.[19]

Clearly, this was also the beginning of the Socialist policy of anti-Congressism which went far beyond opposition to the Congress on the basis of a left or socialist critique. The other side of the medal was that this policy tended to weaken the Socialists themselves and led to splits in their rank and with every split some Socialists joined the Congress.

Socialism in the Congress

With his failure in seeking the help of the Socialists to renovate the Congress and shake it out of its staleness, Nehru decided to act on his own, by radicalizing party policies, especially with regard to the limited steps taken so far for social equality and equity as also economic development. In 1953 itself he had adopted the policy of extending land reforms from the abolition of landlordism to the fixation of ceilings on landholdings. Then came the adoption of the socialist pattern of society as the objective of the Congress at its Avadi session in January 1955. The Avadi Resolution declared:

> Planning should take place with a view to the establishment of a socialistic pattern of society, where the principle means of production are under social ownership or control, production is progressively speeded up and there is equitable distribution of the national wealth.[20]

The Second and Third Five Year Plans provided further commitment to the socialistic pattern of

society. But Nehru defined this in quite a flexible manner, all the while putting strong emphasis on modernization of the economy and increased production. While placing the Second Five Year Plan before parliament, he stated: 'I do not propose to define precisely what socialism means . . . because we wish to avoid rigid or doctrinaire thinking.' And then added: 'But broadly speaking . . . we mean a society in which there is equality of opportunity and the possibility for everyone to live a good life . . . We have, therefore, to lay great stress on equality, on the removal of disparities, and it has to be remembered always that socialism is not the spreading out of poverty. The essential thing is that there must be wealth and production.'[21] In the chapter on the 'Objectives of Planned Development' which he wrote for the Third Five Year Plan document, after reiterating the objective of planning in the same terms as the Avadi Resolution, he quoted from the Second Plan: 'The socialist pattern of society is not to be regarded as some fixed or rigid pattern. It is not rooted in any doctrine or dogma. Each country has to develop according to its own genius and traditions. Economic and social policy has to be shaped from time to time in the light of historical circumstances.'[22]

An indirect result of the left turn taken by the Congress was the adverse impact on the political fortunes of the parties of the left and the right which tended to get marginalized. In particular, by stealing the thunder of the Socialists and the Communists, it also tended to promote dissensions and division among them.

The Congress moved further to the left, programmatically, when, at its Nagpur session in January 1959, it passed a resolution declaring that 'the future agrarian pattern should be that of cooperative joint farming'. Initially, service cooperatives were to be established which would ultimately be transformed into farming cooperatives on a purely voluntary basis. In addition there was to be a ceiling on landholdings and state trading in foodgrains. The Nagpur decisions faced opposition both within and outside the party and were quietly jettisoned. Land ceilings were circumvented by the state governments under the pressure of capitalist farmers and rich peasants supported by the middle peasants. The small experiments in cooperative farming were a failure, and state trading in foodgrains was soon found to be unworkable. Nehru was quite willing to learn and discard unworkable policies, and except for the land ceilings, other aspects of the Nagpur Resolution were soon abandoned. However, the commitment to socialism was once again vigorously asserted at the Bhubaneshwar session of the Congress in January 1964.

While refusing to let the Congress be divided sharply on a left–right basis, Nehru kept the Congress on a left-of-centre course. He consistently attacked the right-wing parties and individuals and treated the left parties with respect even while criticizing them and making clear his differences with them.

Decline of Congress

The stronger assertion of its commitment to socialism did not stop the rot in the Congress party. There was growing criticism of the party in the country as also disillusionment with it. Also internal divisions in the party were growing more serious. The old leaders had grown jaded while new suitable leaders were not coming forth. The party organization continued to weaken; the

party had been in power too long. A large number of Congressmen were no longer satisfied with party work—they hungered for official positions, influence and patronage. Administrative corruption was beginning to go beyond tolerable limits. The Congress was drifting away from the people and losing ground to the Opposition in the states. The growing weakness of the party was revealed by the loss in 1963 of three prestigious Lok Sabha by-elections in the party strongholds. People had begun to ask the questions: After Nehru, who? And after Nehru, what?

Nehru, aided by the Madras chief minister, K. Kamaraj, now made a last effort to infuse new life into the party and restore the balance between the party and the government. This was sought to be achieved through what came to be known as the Kamaraj Plan, produced in August 1963 at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee. The essence of the plan was that a number of leading Congressmen who were in the government as Union cabinet ministers or as chief ministers in the states should voluntarily resign from their posts and take up party organizational work in order to revitalize the party. Nehru was to decide whose resignations were to be finally accepted. This would also enable Nehru to cleanse the party at the top.

The Kamaraj Plan received enthusiastic response from the party rank and file. Immediately nearly 300 resignations from ministerial posts, including those of all members of the Union cabinet and all chief ministers, followed. On 24 August, Nehru announced the acceptance of the resignations of six senior cabinet ministers— Morarji Desai, Lal Bahadur Shastri, S.K. Patil, Jagjivan Ram, B. Gopala Reddy and K.L. Shrimali—and six chief ministers.

The Kamaraj Plan had, however, come too late. Nehru was already ailing and suffered a stroke at Bhubaneshwar in January 1964 and did not have the energy to take the necessary follow-through action. The leaders relieved from government office were not assigned any party duties except for Kamaraj who became the party president in January 1964; they sulked or intrigued against political rivals in the states. The plan also failed as a means of cleansing the party of the dross. The morale of the party continued to sink, and Congressmen were as obsessed with administrative power and patronage as before. An indirect effect of the plan was to weaken Morarji Desai's position in the party. Another outcome of it was that, while failing to restore the prestige and importance of party organizational work, it increased the power of the state party bosses in central politics till Indira Gandhi cut them down to size in 1969. When Nehru died in June 1964, the Congress was continuing to go downhill.