CHAPTER-V

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In 1999 Sonia first stepped into parliamentary life winning election from the Amethi Lok Sabha constituency. She subsequently became Leader of the Opposition. It took her some time to familiarise herself with the functioning of the Parliament. As she used to talk in Hindi at home there was no problem whatsoever for her to communicate with other members in the House. She shed inhibitions quickly and began to raise issues concerning the masses.

The various positions Sonia held so far, she excelled in all. As Leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP), she enjoyed the confidence of all the MPs and as Opposition leader, she brought censure motions against the Vajpayee Government quite skillfully. The Rs. 15 crore relief package for Gujarat announced by the Government was an indication of the success of the censure motion.

As Opposition leader Sonia discharged her role with great responsibility. She raised many crucial issues in the Lok Sabha that were of immense importance. The party brought many motions against the Vajpayee Government. One important motion was in August, 2000 when its member Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi moved it on the need to appoint a commission of inquiry into the Amarnath killings. The motion was defeated by a voice vote. During the Ayodhya controversy, Sonia did not remain silent. She again brought motion in December the same year. Party member Jaipal Reddy demanded that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee drop L.K. Advani, M.M. Joshi and Uma Bharti from the Government for their involvement in the Babri Masjid demolition case and disapproved Vājpayee's stand to exonerate them. However, only
179 members voted in favour of the motion while 291 members negated it. A censure motion in April, 2002 discussed the Gujarat situation. The motion couldn’t destabilise the regime but it definitely undermined the coalition Government’s stability.

Sonia cornered Vajpayee Government whenever any scam surfaced. She brought ‘no confidence’ motion against the Government in August 2003 with several scam charges. As the countdown began for the motion, the party chalked out its strategy to raise issues highlighting the ‘failures’ of the Government on various fronts. The high level political affairs committee, billed as the ‘Super CWC’ of the party, decided the issues such as failure on internal security, financial crisis, farmers’ plight, foreign policy front etc. Other issues like petroleum scam, telecom scam, UTI scam, coffin scam, PAC report on defence purchases during Kargil war, misuse of the CBI were also short-listed. So strong was the verbal attack that even Advani and Fernandes, known for their exceptional debating ability, seemed to be short on reason. She delivered speech for an hour. Instead of responding to the questions she raised, Vajpayee, Advani and Fernandes focused on her language and style. What they meant to say was that her case did not do India proud.

The Congress criticized the Vajpayee Government for not fulfilling the promises made to the public about generation of one crore employment each year. The Government, however, painted a rosy picture about growing employment opportunities saying that due to creation of job openings in information technology, tourism, financial services among others, employment sector had shown an upward trend during the last several years.

Vajpayee made a face-saving argument saying that due to globalisation and economic liberalisation, the employment opportunities in the older types of enterprises might have been reduced. He admitted that unemployment across the
country remained a huge problem but said the Government was committed to create employment opportunities for one crore people per year.

Sonia never hesitated to raise issues that were detrimental to the interest of the common people. She even charged Vajpayee whenever she found some wrong doings on the part of his Government. On many occasions her charges caused embarrassment to the Government. The issues concerning national security, communal harmony and public welfare always remained uppermost in her mind. Many times she felt that what Vajpayee said one day, he deviated from it later. On this she once questioned his rational thinking.

Sonia accused the BJP leadership of tending to lose its ‘balance of mind’ each time she presented its real face to the people. She did not name Vajpayee, but the reference was very much clear. She even questioned the new anti-terror law, which was passed on the strength of a technical majority by making both the Houses sit together.

Sonia remained unwavering in her criticism of Vajpayee’s Gujarat visit in 2002 and termed the bloodbath after the Godhra train fire as an indelible ‘blot’ on the nation’s secular fabric. Sonia accused Vajpayee of disregarding the sensitivities of Gujarat’s riot victims by keeping Chief Minister Narendra Modi in toe all through his visit to the state. In fact, Vajpayee’s tour of Gujarat came in handy for her, who got back at him for his outburst against her at Parliament’s joint sitting.

Sonia paid a day-long visit to the strife-torn Gujarat as a member of the All-party Delegation and listened to the plight of the victims. She said, “The Central Government sees nothing wrong in a chief minister whose law and order administration is so infested by the politics of communalism that it victimizes officials who take a courageous stand
against communal violence.” She also sat on a dharna at Rajghat demanding dismissal of Modi government.

The saffron associates came to their senses after a long silence. NDA Convener George Fernandes decided belatedly to bring a peace march after mutely watching the turmoil. The reason for bringing out such a march was that the liberal sections among the Hindus became outrageous due to prolong disorder. The business community was also unhappy over the continuing violence. Fernandes led the march presumably because if a leader of the BJP, which was widely suspected to be behind the programme, led the procession it would have demeaned its importance.

On Kargil issue Sonia took Vajpayee Government to task. Cornering the Vajpayee Government she said, “We have seen the patriotism of the BJP, which Government was sleeping while the enemy entered the country. Those who cannot ensure the security of the country have no business to stay in power even for a minute.” On armsgate and coffingate she criticized the Government saying, “The episode has opened the eyes of the people to the fact that corruption has penetrated every level in the Government like cancer.”

On Indo-Pak summit Sonia said, “With each passing day the fallout of the much-published Indo-Pak summit at Agra was becoming messier and confusing. Right from the word ‘go’ the summit had gone on the wrong track.” On Parliament attack she flayed the Vajpayee Government thus: “I hope the Government will look into and share with the nation the reasons why the terrorists could make all preparations unhindered and literally knocked at the doors of our Parliament House, despite prior information.”

If one compared Vajpayee’s speech with Sonia’s, he wouldn’t say that she came second best. Many discount the obsession with her as an orator. People were
convinced by her greater touch with reality. She is also concerned about kisans and mazdoors. This aspect of her can be understood when she said: "When I talk about kisans and mazdoors, my opponents are only interested in attacking me personally".

Earlier, one couldn’t imagine her talking about kisans and mazdoors. This shows how Sonia has wider comprehension about the domestic affairs and that as Opposition leader she cannot remain silent about the plight of the lower sections of the society².

It is worthy of mentioning that the Leader of the Opposition is a public office carrying the rank of a cabinet minister. The Government consults the Opposition leader on major policy matters.

**IDEOLOGY AND FAITH**

The Congress vision is rooted in the idea of one nation with a unique diversity of people’s creeds and cultures. Country’s core values have always been its liberal mind and its tradition of tolerance. The politics of hate is alien to its civilization. The party strives to bring advancement and well-being of the people through constitutional means.

As Congress President, Sonia fully understands the ideology and values that the party stands for. She plays clean politics and believes in transparency, not in hidden agenda. She is of the view that once elected, the government must work for the betterment of the people. That is why whatever her party promises to the electorate, she whole-heartedly tries to keep them.

The Congress functions on certain basic values like unity of the people, no division on caste or regional lines, rapid economic development, independent foreign policy, commitment to equality and social justice and improvement in the quality of
the lives of the people. It is for involvement of all sections of the people in the nation building.

The Congress is the only party that has wider social base and large reach—among the poor farmers, the working people, the suppressed castes, the women, the religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities as well as among the middle class and higher social strata. The party is constantly fighting to preserve and maintain democratic and social values.

Sonia believes in true secularism and emulates Rajiv’s assertion made in his first address to the nation from the ramparts of Red Fort that “secularism is bedrock of our nationhood”. If there is anything where Sonia has taken an uncompromising line, it is communalism and it is this stand that she emerged triumphant in many elections.

Sonia runs the Congress party on this very basis. She knows very well that if the party deviates from the secular path, it would be impossible to keep the nation united. The party’s secular credential has been tested over the years. Even other political parties endorse this. Those parties, which believe in similar creed, join hands with the Congress to take on the communal forces.

The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty believes in genuine secularism. More than anything else, it is this legacy that attracts the liberal intelligentsia. Sonia is able to bring together secular forces on one side to take on the communal forces. The Left parties also believe that the Congress is secular by the core and join hands with it in fighting communal forces3.

The Opposition party charged that Sonia follows soft Hindutva. Criticising the BJP for launching malicious propaganda, the Congress chief said she didn’t follow soft Hindutva. “If I go to Kamakhya temple in Guwahati as I have been doing for
many years, why should I be accused of soft Hindutva? If I visit Dargah and meet Muslim clerics, why should I be accused of appeasement? These are labels that have no meeting points”, she said.

Sonia’s contribution towards maintaining peace and harmony is immense. After the Congress formed Government at the Centre under her leadership, the fear of Godhra incident has vanished from the minds of minorities. Any assault on the values of tolerance, secularism and plurality makes her very sad.

Sonia considers that the Congress is the only party that guarantees for all-inclusive pluralistic society. She also maintains her pro-plurality attitude ever since she became party President. She is for strict adherence to pluralistic society. According to her own perception India can realise her aspirations for global leadership if it remains all-inclusive at home.

If there is one thing where Sonia has uncompromising line, it is communalism. She has firm resolve to fight against communalism. Whenever a communal disturbance is reported, she remains perturbed. She understands that riots only cause bitterness among the communities and give rise to conflicts. She strongly believes in the concept of one big family.

Sonia doesn’t follow a particular religion but have faith in all. As teenager, she used to visit church regularly. Her intention to visit church declined as she grew up. At Cambridge she rarely attended church service. Here too she is not regular in visiting the church, but doesn’t miss Christmas Mass. She has adopted the religion of her husband that is Hindu and wishes that her last rites be performed according to the Hindu ritual.

In her initial years in the Gandhi family Sonia knew many things about faith from her mother-in-law. On several occasions her mother-in-law accompanied her
whenever she visited famous shrines in the country. Her husband also took her along when he visited renowned religious places. She has already visited some of the country’s famous temples—from Kamakhya Temple in Assam to Ambaji Temple in Gujarat and Harmandar Sahib Temple in Amritsar to Tirupati Temple in Andhra Pradesh—to seek blessings. Whenever she visits religious places she shows great respect to them and pays obeisance as an ardent devotee. On invitation she participates in religious functions of different faiths.

Sonia best realises that without secular credential, India cannot survive. She is secularist in thought as well as in action. She has great respect for all religions and fully understands that friendship and goodwill among different faiths are the essential conditions for peace in the country. That is why she has embodied principles like spirit of sacrifice, unity and diversity.

Sonia is a strong believer in democratic values and has special honour for those who come through the system. Based on this ideal, she declared after becoming party President for the second time that there would be election for the CWC posts. Reacting to her such intentions, several state party units passed resolutions asking her to nominate CWC members instead of holding formal elections. But she reiterated the same intention even at the Chandigarh conclave. “I am always in favour of democratic methods, I do believe elections are preferable,” she said. This shows her commitment to the ideals of parliamentary democracy.

TRIUMPHS AND DEFEATS

After entering into active politics, Sonia has, in fact, brought miracles for the party. Several elections were fought—local, assembly and parliamentary but she scored victory in many of them. She tasted only fewer defeats. Her first and remarkable
triple victory was in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in 1998. Some of the closely-contested elections are described below.

In Gujarat assembly elections in 2002, the Congress had little hopes. Even then the party gave the BJP a tough challenge. Before elections, Sonia sensibly appointed Shankersinh Vaghela as Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) chief. Vaghela was a match for the incumbent Chief Minister Modi. Vaghela is a leader of the Kshatriyas who are regarded as OBCs in the state and accounts for nearly 17 per cent of the votes. Although an OBC himself, Modi didn’t have a caste base. He had to rely on Hindu votes. His public rating was, however, high in comparison to Vaghela’s.

Modi played the Hindutva card well and projected the Congress as a party that tries to placate Muslims. Vaghela, however, exploited the caste factor. In the 1988 elections when Vaghela formed the Rashtriya Janata Party, he won just four seats in the 182-member assembly. This time Vaghela campaigned as a member of the Congress party. The position, therefore, was that Modi relied on Hindu euphoria while Vaghela banked upon caste and incumbency factors. The Hindutva card shadowed the incumbency factors and the Congress lost the election.

The Gujarat defeat had a bearing on the Congress party. The party was little disappointed. However, it helped the high command to make a resolve to fight future elections with greater resolution. The BJP victory was not a political earthquake for the Congress party. On the basis of in-house surveys, its leadership had hoped at least to contain the saffron party, if not defeat it.

It is pertinent to mention that the Congress party made considerable inroads into the Gujarat electorate and that happened because of the foresightedness of the Congress President. She decided to contest the polls projecting Vaghela as the chief
ministerial candidate to give the BJP a tough challenge. To make the contest more challenging, she entered into election pacts with Pawar's NCP and Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (UP).

The credit for the victory of the BJP was not entirely Modi's, who was widely perceived as the architect of the infamous organised massacre. Many believe that by playing the Hindutva card and rousing the anti-Muslim passion among the religious bigotry with the support of Sangh Parivar, the BJP made the win possible. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), fighting for the cause of the community, had no qualms in saying that it was its brand of Hindutva that did the tricks. After the successful experiment in the Hindutva laboratory of Gujarat, the VHP planned to make the whole country a laboratory to establish "Hindu supremacy". Reacting to the victory, VHP leader Praveen Bhai Togadia said, "We will make laboratory of the whole country. This is our promise and our resolve." Once he said in Jaipur, "I can't waste even two days in building the laboratory. Rajasthan has already become the laboratory of the Hindutva."

Buoyant by the Gujarat outcome, the BJP wanted to repeat the experience in other states as well. The party first put to test the experiment in Himachal Pradesh (HP) where 98 per cent has Hindu population. Not only had this, before the election the party infused new vigour in the state unit by sending party's poll strategists there. They devoted their full energy to the elections. But the results made them bite dust. The BJP tasted a shock defeat in the state. The state, which was billed as a BJP stronghold, went to the Congress kitty. The results proved that the so-called Hindutva wave was confined to Gujarat only.

In politically crucial Uttar Pradesh, the Congress was not in a good position but the BJP also in bad shape. It experienced shock defeat in the 2002 assembly elections where its Chief Minister Rajnath Singh made tall claims about the outcome.
As the results were out, the party was relegated to the third position. The party conceded power to the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) with outside support. The party's defeat didn't end here. Its neighbouring Uttaranchal government also went to the Congress hand.

Another interesting development was the Kashmir election. The election was due in the state but militancy had been at its peak. The Central Government had doubt whether it would be possible to hold free and fair elections there. The election in the state virtually posed a challenge for the Centre. However, it accepted the challenge and decided to go ahead with its election plans. No political party, except the Congress could muster courage to campaign vigorously. The result was that the Congress party performed well. It became the second largest party in terms of seats won.

Besides Gujarat, the Congress party's other major defeats were Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh assembly elections in 2003. A notable thing to watch about is that Sonia never blames colleagues for poor show of the party. Instead she tries to send a message that it is she who should be blamed. Such magnanimity on her part can be understood from instances she has set on several occasions. After the electoral debacle in the three states mentioned above, the CWC had a daylong session to review the reasons and to chalk out future course of action. Sonia took a practical stance, advising all the CWC members not to start blame game. She told them that the focus should be on planning out a strategy for the forthcoming General and other elections. Sonia addressed the CWC members thus:

I have no hesitation in acknowledging that the prime responsibility for our poor performance in these elections rests with me. I am more than willing to accept whatever judgement or action the party chooses to pass or take. In owning my responsibility, I must affirm a commitment as well. Whatever position I hold or role I
fulfill in the future, I will not, at any time, abandon my responsibility to our loyal workers and to the people of our country. I came into politics with a purpose—to contribute all that I could to the welfare of the people, to strengthening the party and to preserving and furthering the secular heritage and traditions of our land.

My resolve in this remains unshakable. I may have made mistakes. Perhaps I could not follow my won principles outlined 18 months ago, when you first elected me Chairperson of the Congress Party in Parliament. On that occasion I pledged that our party would concentrate on working at the grass-roots level to regain the confidence of the people, to communicate our ideology and strengthen the values on which your organisation was founded. I pledge that I would rebuild our party organisation. You have honoured by once again electing me CPP leader and I will discharge this function to the best of my ability.

Elections are important in the democratic process. However, equally important and enduring are the party’s goal and vision of a strong, united, secular and modern India, an India in which poverty is eradicated and all forms of exploitation—social, economic and political—are ended. Today, Congress is raising itself to meet the serious challenges facing the nation, protecting the integrity and unity of the nation, preserving its secular, pluralistic, cohesive social structures and forestalling all attempts and undermining the institutions, which have been set up to achieve these objectives.

The Congress will endeavour to evolve a broad national consensus, which is needed for sound governance of the largest pluralistic society in the world. The Congress will not allow partisan interest to come in the way of this national task. The Congress believes that all political parties dedicated to the larger national interest should work together towards ensuring the maintenance and protection of the secular and pluralistic character of society.
The Sonia desires to make Indian economy strong, viable and people-oriented. Sonia wanted many changes are needed both in politics and programmes. Most of these issues have been identified in the 1999 election manifesto of the party. The Congress-ruled states have special responsibilities. They should not only implement their promises to the people but also set examples of good governance.

In this election our manifesto contains programmes for the benefit of farmers and industry. We will strengthen the Panchayati Raj system. It will be our endeavour that it becomes flawless. From independence till today the Congress party has used power for the development of the country and to serve the people. This has been the tradition of Nehruji, Indiraji and Rajivji. I too have pledged to follow the same path. Politics to me is a means to serve you, a struggle to uphold my principles. I am ready for it.

Sonia's vision is rooted in the idea of one nation with a unique diversity of people's creeds and cultures. Our country's strength has always been its liberal mind and its tradition of tolerance. The politics of hate is alien to our civilization. I The Congress is the world's largest democratic party. Our tri-colour has flown for over a century throughout the country. The Congress party is the only guarantor of stability, unity, prosperity and social justice. Our commitment is to revive the economy and to provide basic amenities to the poorest of the poor. We believe in the empowerment of the Indian women so that they can find their rightful place as equal partners in every sphere. We particularly look to our generation of young Indians whose expectation and ambition encompass the world. We assure them of opportunity so that they can become the cutting edge of India in the new millennium. Ours is not a battle merely for votes or for public office. It is a battle for India of our dream, for the future of our children. I invite all of you to support us in this historic
battle. I urge you to join hands with us so that together we may build a strong, united and resurgent India, she said.

A fundamental assessment was made politically and organisationally. The first question asked was why the Congress went down in the battle despite the strength with which the party re-emerged as a political force between gaining power in half the states constituting the Indian Union. The think tank believed that the basic reasons for the progress was that the Congress re-asserted its ideological position, emphasising its commitment to pluralism, socialism, democracy, balanced economic reforms and a measured approach to the problems of foreign policy and security of the country. The rank and file of the party responded to this strong ideological orientation leading to the electoral victories in several states. This is the point of view the CWC reflected in its resolution.

CONCLAVES AND CONVENTIONS

Conclaves and conventions are forums where free and frank discussions take place on various issues. It is an effort to share wisdom of senior party leaders, chief ministers and cadres in order to find solutions to various problems facing the country. The exercise also helps in creating a synergy between the Centre, the State governments and the party to pursue a common goal. Whatever discussions are held in these meetings they undoubtedly get national character.

The Congress party under Sonia's leadership has held several conclaves. These conclaves provided the Congress President ideal opportunities to deliberate on different aspects of issues with the leaders and acquaint the activists with the party's perception. The conclaves were used to galvanize the activists with party's new strategy under one roof.
Sonia has utilised the conclaves to her best advantage. Through these conclaves, she in fact, tried to get feedbacks in the presence of her party colleagues so that proper plan and programme could be made for the future. These conclaves also served as a platform for her to issue directives directly to the party functionaries. Sonia is a hard taskmaster. She constantly monitors that the Congress governments in states perform well and the chief ministers maintain their propriety. Although the party has been ruling in many states, she, however, never destabilized a single government. On the contrary, she has been largely supportive and keeping a strict vigil on their plans and programmes.

After becoming Congress chief, Sonia has so far held seven conclaves. Each one has its own significance. Whenever an important message to be given to the party functionaries or its cadres, she holds conclaves. The conclaves and conventions that have been organised are: Chief Ministers’ meet, party managers’ meet and block and district presidents’ meet.

The first conclave was held in New Delhi in 2000. The thrust of the New Delhi conclave was on taking general review of the performance of the Congress-ruled states. Being the first conclave after Sonia became party President, great enthusiasm was seen among the leaders. The next conclave was also held in the national capital the same year. It was called to give the chief ministers directives on good governance.

In April, 2002 third conclave was held in Guwahati. The venue was chosen to signal the party’s concern with the northeast states. In this conclave the party President assessed the performance of the states. The conclave kept the focus on governments’ show ahead of the next round of the assembly elections in several states.
The theme of the conclave was highlighted in the Punjab, Uttaranchal, UP and Manipur assembly elections. Right through the campaign the party leadership compared the progress made by the Congress-ruled states with those ruled by the BJP. The issue gained even greater relevance since the party had 13 chief ministers that time.

The fourth conclave was held in Mt. Abu in Rajasthan in November 2002. It was here that the disinvestment of Public Sector Units (PSUs) was ruled out. Besides the BJP ruled states of Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the Congress governments in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Delhi were to seek fresh mandate in 2003. Accordingly, the meeting dealt with subjects that affected the weaker sections. The socioeconomic themes that impinge on rural development got prominence. The Shimla conclave, the fifth in the line, was held in 2003. Apart from the 1998 Panchmarhi conclave, which spoke of coalition only when “absolutely necessary”, this conclave deliberated on the idea of coalition arrangement. The willingness to participate in coalitions became just a declaration of intent in this conclave. Here the Congress declared that the party was ready for parliamentary election any time and called upon the like-minded parties to come together to defeat the BJP. Later this very decision proved to be an epoch-making.

Coalitions have become the rule in Indian politics and the Congress decided to accept this reality after considerable deliberation in this conclave. Earlier, the party refused to accept this inevitability. Hence the occasional assertions were given, from Panchmarhi or elsewhere, about securing a majority in the Lok Sabha and dispensing with alliances.

Sonia invited about 10,000 party representatives functioning at the block and district levels to a convention in New Delhi the same year. It was something that no Congress leader had done in the past. The entire exercise was conducted with the
objective of establishing a direct rapport with the grass-root representatives in order to not only boost their morale but also to give them a feeling of involvement in the running of the party.

It was a novel method adopted by Sonia to send a clear signal to senior party functionaries working in the organisation as well as in the governments in various states that they should not ever try to undermine the party workers. In fact, she made it a point to sit through the entire duration of the session to personally acquaint herself with the viewpoint of the party functionaries.

The speakers resented before their high command the reality about some leaders who made tall claims in Delhi but did precious little back in the areas which they claim to represent. The speakers were, in fact, encouraged to put forward their viewpoints so that steps could be taken to remove their misgivings.

Several slogans with focus on the NDA Government’s failures were raised in order to energize the workers who were repeatedly told that the longer the BJP ruled the country, the longer would be the misery of the people. The response of the activists got reflected in their resolve throughout the session to make Sonia the next prime minister. On her part, she minced no words.

The message that went out was “think for the country and act for the party. It is the party which makes the government and not the government that makes the party”. There was another slogan: Congress ka hath, garibon key saath. It had shades of Indira’s famous victory credo in 1971. In fact, Sonia was slowly and steadily getting into the mould of her mother-in-law who was the greatest mass leader in electoral politics in the twentieth century.

Sonia used the convention to arm the grass-root functionaries with the party’s perceptions on key national and international issues. On the occasion she touched
upon two crucial issues that had often created confusion among the party workers—Hindutva and Ayodhya. The party, she said, wanted that status quo be maintained on Ayodhya and would respect a judicial verdict on it. She outlined the Congress vision of secularism as a battle against communalism, fanaticism and political misuse of any religion for polarising the society.

Sonia the Congress President was judging the party's strength with every passing day. Since taking the reins of the party, Sonia had been winning back the support of Muslims, Dalits and farmers. The people of the country were now more inclined towards the party as its state governments had been showing good performance.

In the convention, Sonia identified herself completely with the functionaries and advised the ministers and party office bearers to attend functions organised at the block and district levels. She told the colleagues that they should not be stingy so far as extending courtesy to activists who actually form the backbone of the party as well as the soldiers who fight for the ideology of the Congress.

Sonia contrasted the Congress’ focus on development and good governance with that of the BJP's. Her speech signalled the beginning of the Congress campaign for the next round of assembly and parliamentary elections. The session had a clear stamp of her and made categorical assertions in respect of the party’s ideology as well as areas of priority, which needed to be attended to without delay. The enthusiasm and participation at the convention was vibrant.

If enthusiasm be any criterion, the mood at the conclave was much more buoyant and there were far more posters, banners and flags of the party than those of the NDA constituents, who were celebrating completion of four years in the
Government. On the contrary, there was no visible sign of celebration at either the BJP’s central office or at the offices of the constituents.

Now people began to recognise Sonia as a popular leader and believed that she could pose a formidable challenge to the BJP. She works hard under difficult circumstances and has become politically mature quite early than expected. She is very much in a position to lead the country through the 21st century—as visualized by her husband. Not satisfied with the Vajpayee-led NDA Government, more and more people wanted Sonia to lead the nation. The party’s veteran leaders were solidly behind her and that was a strength for her.

Annoyed and anguished with the directionless politics of the BJP and knowing that it was only Congress that had traditionally cared for their rights, many leaders joined the party. To name a few, one of the most popular Muslim leaders from UP, Akbar Ahmed Dumpy, joined the Congress with his large followers. Dalit leader from Delhi, Jaikishan, also came into the Congress fold.

The sixth conclave was held in Chandigarh in October 2005 after the Congress-led UPA Government remained in office for over one year. All the chief ministers of the Congress-ruled states participated in the conclave. Sonia called this conclave to take stock of the implementation level of the party’s manifesto in these states. She also reviewed the performance report to the chief ministers. She wants that those have been given responsibility of a task they must execute it with sincerity and honesty. She has strong aversion for violation of the rule of law or basic tenets of the propriety.¹⁰

The conclave was meant to brief the chief ministers on how to go about implementing programmes for the aam admi so that they don’t let down the government in the next elections. The leadership was concerned at any possible
erosion in its mass base. A review of the implementation of the party’s programmes for the socially disadvantaged sections was already overdue. So the conclave served twin purpose-one, to activate the set-up to clear all remaining programmes and second, to put the organisation for the next election mode. The conclave also discussed crucial issues that were affecting the people like starvation death in Andhra Pradesh and power problem in Delhi.

On conclusion, Sonia described the conclave very purposeful as it served to find out the status of implementation of the manifesto, which the party promised to the people. That was precisely the object of holding the conclave.

The Nainital conclave of the Chief Ministers of Congress-ruled states held in September 2006 was seventh in the line. Besides 14 Chief Ministers, the Prime Minister, several Union Ministers and AICC leaders in charge of states attended the meeting. The two-day meeting discussed wide-ranging issues including internal security, relations with Pakistan, farmers’ problem and economic development. In the conclave the main focus was rural India for which Sonia has high priority. Agriculture and internal security were the issues discussed quite prominently. The leaders also discussed strategy to be adopted in the coming assembly polls in at least four states. According to Sonia, the UPA Government had already taken several initiatives in the farm sector and the positive impact on the growth of agriculture would be noticed soon. She was very much concerned about the low production of food grain, as a result the Centre had to import wheat. She wants to address problems of the farm sector on a priority basis so that growing food security can be ensured, as the population of the country will reach 1.4 billion after 20 years. She finds that the institutional credit for small and marginal farmers are very low as a result the crop insurance coverage is just 10 per cent of the farmers. The National Commission of Farmers (NCF) headed by eminent agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan has
submitted four reports, which awaits serious consideration and it is likely that the
Government will come out with a new agricultural policy. The NCF suggestion
include setting up of farmers' commission in each state and fixing of credit with
annual rate at 4 per cent besides insurance scheme for all crops and determination of
minimum support price so that farmers' regular income can be protected. She urged
that focus should be laid on agriculture in the 11th Five Year Plan and also called
upon the chief ministers to unleash a second green revolution in their states and also
emphasised on the need to strengthen the Public Distribution System (PDS).
On Special Economic Zone (SEZ) her view was that though the industry required
land for expansion such moves shouldn't jeopardize farm prospects. Issuing a
cautious note she said that for developing SEZs, the governments should take extra
care in acquiring farmers' prime land and also urged the chief ministers to ensure that
farmers get proper compensation for their land. She further added that farmers could
be given stakes in projects set up on land acquired from them. She also felt the need
for complete overhaul of land administration. About suicides by farmers in some
states she said it was a challenge to the collective conscience and called for
immediate action.

On dialogue with Pakistan, Sonia said it was desirable but care had to be taken
that it didn't compromise on country's security. She supported Prime Minister's
move to resume talks with Pakistan President but at the same time concerned about
terrorist attacks in different parts of the country by Pakistan-based outfits.

On minority bashing, Sonia said that no community should feel being under
siege because of the terrorism. She, however, cautioned that while pursuing terrorists,
care had to be taken so that no innocent persons of a particular community were
harassed or implicated. She was of the view that there should be no compromise on
internal security and stressed upon creating motivated forces to combat terrorism11.
JAN SAMPARK ABHIYAN

Sonia coined a mass contact programme to have greater reach. She drew up the strategy based on the declaration she made at the Shimla conclave that the Congress was ready to face elections daily time. Keeping this assertion in mind she conceived the programme and called it Jan Sampark Abhiyan. Under this programme she visited remote areas and had interaction with the people of different strata to make her aware of their problems. Quite a wide area was covered at a time and people came in large numbers to see her, to hear her and to apprise her of their difficulties.

Through the Abhiyan, Sonia herself became known to a vast section of the population across the country. The emotion with which she spoke of her mother-in-law and husband evoked a tremendous response, especially among the women. By her emotionally surcharged addresses she could easily win the confidence of the people. It gave a big advantage to her. Seeing the overwhelming response, she realised that if the goodwill were transferred into votes, her party would certainly make some impact in the elections.

THE NUCLEAR DEAL: EMERGENCE OF 'POLITICIAN' MANMOHAN AND 'PRAGMATIC' SONIA

Of the many challenges Sonia has faced from within her party and outside over the last five years, the Indo-US nuclear deal must go down as the trickiest. Virtually cornered from all sides, faced with rigidity and one-upmanship on the part of her Left allies, Sonia’s deft handling of the crisis saved the government between when almost all political gurus and commentators had written the UPA’s obituary.

Between August 2007 and July 2008, Manmohan and Sonia teamed up in such a shrewd and decisive manner to checkmate their opponents, discarding old and
trusted friends in the Left and courting new and volatile allies like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Amar Singh, that their sense of pragmatism stunned many who had a somewhat different perception of the two dramatis personae. Very few political pundits would have thought that the duo had the gumption and the practical political wherewithal they displayed to put it across their opponents. For weeks, Delhi witnessed rather sordid wheeling-dealing and real politic at work with Manmohan-Sonia occupying centre stage. In the end, for a bulk of their party men, the end result justified the means.

The Left's support to the UPA was critical as the coalition, with 237 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha, lacked a simple majority. But when the Left pulled out of the UPA on 8 July 2008, Manmohan-Sonia already had a contingency plan in operation. Old foe Samajwadi Party with 39 MPs came to the UPA’s rescue so that when the entire drama reached its climax with the trust vote the UPA had 275 MPs with 256 MPs opposing it.

The crisis over the N-deal had boiled over when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh gave a rare and candid interview to Manini Chatterjee of the Telegraph. Perhaps a tad tired of the Left parties' constant bark and opposition to economic restructuring, the good doctor finally dared them to bite as their diatribe against the Indo-US nuclear deal continued unabated.

An uncharacteristically belligerent Manmohan told Manini: 'I told them (the Left) that it is not possible to renegotiate the deal. It is an honourable deal, the Cabinet has approved it, we cannot go back on it. I told them to do whatever they want to do, if they want to withdraw support, so be it... 'He was referring to his conversation with the CPM's Prakash Karat and the CPI's A.B. Bardhan, hours after the Left had released a statement on the nuclear deal.
Reacting to the Left's tough and inflexible posture, the prime minister said he was 'not angry but anguished' at the harsh tone and tenor of the Left's reaction and made it clear that the UPA-Left relationship could not be a one-sided affair. 'I don't get angry, I don't want to use harsh words. They are our colleagues and we have to work with them. But they also have to learn to work with us.'

According to Manini, although he did not raise his voice, those last ten words had a hint of steel which underlined the prime minister's new resolve to take on the Left.

According to Manmohan, the Left had a 'flawed understanding' not just of the 123 Agreement but also of India's intrinsic strength and its enhanced status in the world. He said, 'It is an honourable deal which enlarges India's development options, particularly in regard to energy security and environmental protection, and it doesn't in any way affect our ability to pursue our nuclear weapons programme. We have not surrendered an iota of our freedom in this regard; not an iota of our sovereignty.'

Asked why then was the Left objecting to the deal, the prime minister said: 'I don't know. . . (but) they seem to have a problem with the United States' and elaborated on his own stand: 'I want India's relations to improve with all powers and we have been doing that-with the US, with Russia, with the EU, with France, and particularly with China. We have had a breakthrough with China, a historic agreement where we have defined the principles that will outline the border agreement...'

On the Left's fears that the 123 Agreement would draw India further into a strategic alliance with the US, rendering it an American satellite, Manmohan raised a counter-argument, 'How can we ever become anyone's satellite? Yes, we live in an increasingly interdependent world but the challenge before us is to forge new
linkages, widen our strategic options and, at the same time, guard against the negative side of the process of globalization.

Manmohan’s remarks were significant in the context of the Left’s consistent stand on why the N-deal agreement was not acceptable. They viewed the agreement in the light of the Hyde Act passed by the US Congress and in the context of the wider implications of India being bound by a strategic alliance with the US and its adverse consequences for an independent foreign policy, sovereignty and the economic interests of the people. The Left kept urging the Congress leadership to decide on the matter with circumspection, saying it will have serious consequences for the government and the country.

CPM secretary general Karat articulated at length why he was opposed to the deal. In an interview to Manini, he responded almost point-by-point to the issues dealt by Manmohan. While he reiterated the Left’s broad opposition to having a political partnership with the US, Karat denied that there was a basic lack of trust and said, ‘I do not agree. It is true that there has been a basic difference in approach between the prime minister and the Left on the nuclear agreement. We recognize that he has strong convictions on the soundness and utility of the agreement. Our differing view on the agreement does not mean that we do not have respect for the prime minister. His integrity is unquestioned. As far as I am concerned, I appreciate the frank exchange of views we have had on many occasions.’

Karat also clarified that the prime minister’s move to publicly dare the Left to withdraw support had little bearing on the stand-off and said, ‘If you are referring to the Telegraph interview given by the prime minister, that has had no bearing on our stand on the nuclear deal nor did it precipitate any crisis. The political stand-off arose because of divergent positions and not personal differences.’ Karat also disagreed with the view that the prime minister would lose his prestige if he continued in office.
without pushing the deal and said, 'As the prime minister heading a coalition government without the backing of a parliamentary majority for the deal, his not going ahead despite his firm conviction that it is a good deal will not detract from his stature. This situation is well understood in coalitional politics around the world.'

CPM leader Sitaram Yechury too articulated the Left's opposition to the Indo-US nuclear deal, questioning the issue of its importance in the context of the country's energy requirements. Quoting the Planning Commission's assessment on the future energy scenario, he said, 'India's current power generation is 1.27 gigawatts. At the current rate of the GDP, this needs to grow to 337 GW by 2016-17. There is no doubt that if this is not achieved, India's pace of development would be arrested. The moot question, however, is whether nuclear energy expansion is the only or the best option that we have today. In 2006, 3.9 GW of nuclear power was generated, that is, 3 per cent of our total power generation. In the most optimistic scenario, the Planning Commission estimates that this could go at best to 20 GW by 2016, just over 6 per cent of our production at that point of time.'

Yechury urged Manmohan to consider untapped potential in hydroelectricity to solve the country's energy needs and pointed at the recent discovery of large quantities of gas in the country. Then he went on to give a cost-benefit analysis of the nuclear option. 'The prime minister himself has publicly said that we are targeting, say, 40,000 MW to be produced by nuclear energy by 2020 and 2025. Out of this 40,000 let us presume 10,000 MW would come from our own domestic reactors, that leaves 30,000 that is to be generated from nuclear energy and if this 30,000 MW is generated through imported nuclear reactors, the cost estimation for every MW will be 11 crores of rupees, that is, for this 30,000 we will be spending 330,000 crores of rupees. The same 30,000 MW if we produce through thermal it will be 4 crores per MW and the same if we produce through hydroelectricity or through gas, it will be 3
crores per MW So, the cost differential is something to the tune of two lakh crores plus.' Yechury ended his speech with a quote of Woodrow Wilson: 'I would rather lose a cause that will some day win than win a cause that will some day lose.'

With the Left firmly opposed to the deal and an adamant Manmohan pitching for it, the period between August 2007 and July 2008 saw newer dimensions in Sonia’s profile. The UPA was hopelessly short of majority and completely unprepared to face the electorate: The prospect of failing to run a coalition successfully for five years (as opposed to Vajpayee’s ability to run it) loomed large. Moreover, within the Congress, a section of party men began whispering about Sonia’s choice of the prime minister who was seen as somewhat hot-headed and having scant regard for coalition dharma, that is, the sensitivity of allies in the coalition.

Treading on thin ice, Sonia took a series of measures. She sounded as if her heart was with the Left; she convinced Karat, Yechury, Bardhan, Raja and others to sit down and talk about the issue. A Left-UPA coordination committee was set up. Pranab Mukherjee, a man for all seasons and flavours, was made convener of the committee. Counting on his high trust quotient with the Left’s Bengal brigade, Pranab kept everyone engaged even as he kept flying in and out of the country and paid numerous visits to Calcutta to hold secret parleys with Left patriarch Jyoti Basu (a strong votary of closer Congress-Left ties) and the moderate chief minister of Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.

In the initial phase of the stand-off the Left was taken in a bit by Sonia’s and Manmohan’s conciliatory sounds made at the Hindustan Times’ Leadership Summit on 11 October 2007 when both the Congress president and the prime minister declared that early Lok Sabha elections were not on the cards and the government would like to last its full term till 2009.
In the presence of a galaxy of leaders, including Yechury the two leaders made it clear that the government would not risk its survival by pressing ahead with the nuclear deal. The most significant remark came from Manmohan himself who steadfastly defended the controversial Indo-US civil nuclear agreement but added: ‘If the deal does not come through, that is not the end of life.’ The prime minister, who had put his personal prestige and the government’s survival at stake on the passage of the nuclear deal, however, admitted that it would be ‘a disappointment’ if it did not come through. ‘In life, one has to take certain disappointments and move on to the next...’

Sonia, who spoke after Singh had left the venue, elaborated on those remarks. ‘No, we are not in favour of early elections. As the prime minister has said, the deadline is 2009. We are going to do all that we can to see that we implement our programmes till 2009.’ On her part, Sonia also went out of her way to praise Singh. She stressed that he had been her one and only choice for the post of prime minister all along and his government had done a very good job.

Though on the face of it the Left remained guarded in its response, privately they began claiming a shift in the mood in ruling circles. The Left leadership also gave lot of weightage to statements made by UPA allies, namely, Sharad Pawar and Lalu Prasad, publicly stating that a breach with the Left and early elections were not worth it—especially since the future of the deal itself was in jeopardy. The announcement of elections to the Gujarat assembly only strengthened this lobby which felt that a fissure in the UPA coalition would end up helping the BJP.

Some political analysts feel that at this point (October 2007), Karat, who had been empowered by Left allies and own central committee and politburo to act decisively, dithered. Karat and Yechury were apparently taken in by Sonia’s persona, her dispassionate way of looking at issues and an indication that she would act as
arbitrator. By the time reality dawned upon them in July 2008 that Sonia was first and foremost a Congressperson and was solely driven by her survival instincts to save the party and the government, it was too late.

Though a consummate political theoretician, Karat blundered in assuming that ‘other things being equal’ the UPA would not be able to muster support. His closest ally and friend Mulayam Singh Yadav ditched and dumped him when he needed the Samajwadi Party most. Karat should have seen it coming and would have been better off had he sought a piece of advice from former Prime Minister V.P Singh or any other oldie in the ‘Janata parivar’.

The tale of Mulayam’s change of heart was no less intriguing. A hard-core Nehru-Gandhi family bai ter, the Samajwadi Party leader remained reluctant till the very end about supporting the Congress which he has opposed over several decades. Influenced by his politician son Akhilesh and associate Amar Singh, Mulayam saw reason and switched side days before the crucial vote in Parliament on 22 July.

He had several compulsions. In Uttar Pradesh, his arch-rival Mayawati, riding high on ‘social engineering’, had left him with little political space. With the socially weaker sections, upper castes and Muslims providing a formidable ring around Mayawati, the Samajwadi Party’s dreams of netting Uttar Pradesh on its own appeared bleak. Since May 2007, each day Mulayam woke up with news of some or the other party associate getting arrested, beaten or wronged by Mayawati’s party or regime. Caught between a hostile Centre and a hawkish Mayawati, Mulayam chose to make peace with whom he considered a lesser evil.

Mulayam had strong reasons to be upset with the Left. He was hurt by Karat’s indifference to some of the Left leaders’ constant tirade against him and Amar Singh and his inability to stem the hostility. Gurudas Dasgupta, Bardhan and several others
habituall used very strong language against Mulayam and his Man Friday Amar Singh for siding with corporate India. Mulayam is said to have repeatedly urged Karat to rein in Dasgupta and Bardhan but his pleas fell on deaf ears. When the opportunity came, the Samajwadi Party returned the compliment. Amar was even heard mocking the CPM general secretary: ‘But why should Comrade Karat be upset? He is the one who has been wanting us to be with the Congress all this while.’

There were other characters who played a pivotal role in bringing the Samajwadi Party and the Congress closer. While Prime Minister Manmohan Singh demonstrated his closely guarded political claws, Akhilesh Yadav’s friendship with Rahul Gandhi, and Amar Singh’s political acumen saw a virtual impossibility turning into a reality. The prime minister’s role was most interesting. For a man who consciously kept a ‘safe distance’ from the political class, his attention towards the Samajwadi Party offered a rare insight into ‘politician’ Manmohan. The economist was well aware of the bad blood between Sonia and the Samajwadi Party.

Amar had received a snub on 16 May 2004 when Sonia had hosted a dinner to honour UPA allies. As the power elite converged around Sonia Gandhi’s dinner table, Amar Singh and Ajit Singh turned up but instead of getting a welcome smile, they were faced with the question: ‘Who invited them?’ Armed with letters extending ‘unconditional support’ to the UPA, the two leaders of the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal had turned up along with Harkishen Singh Surjeet, setting off a buzz around. Amar was later heard countering the ‘uninvited’ slur on a television channel. ‘Nobody attends uninvited,’ Amar said after the dinner. He, however, admitted that he was not invited but went at Surjeet’s request.

The next year, Amar and the Samajwadi Party did not go to the annual UPA get-together. The next two years too the Samajwadi Party was absent at the high table. But on 22 May 2008, when no one had an inkling of Mulayam-Amar bailing
out Manmohan on the N-deal, an unusual scene was witnessed at 7 Race Course Road.

The Samajwadi Party general secretary’s guest card had placed him between Shivraj Patil and Sitaram Yechury at the prime minister’s table, along with Sharad Pawar and Santosh Mohan Dev. Even as soup was served after the customary speeches and the release of the annual ‘report to the people’, there was no sign of Armar. By the time dessert was being served, Amar’s place mat was gently removed and Karan Singh took his seat. Some guests at the dinner even wondered aloud if Sonia was toying with the idea of snubbing Amar once again.

As Amar Singh and Ram Gopal Yadav, parliamentarian cousin of Mulayam, arrived and discreetly sought out a place, Sonia spotted him. A tentative smile followed. Amar had apparently been delayed due to a sudden and unexpected downpour but the host was not complaining. In fact, the prime minister walked the extra mile—actually about twenty steps—up to the table and took a seat right next to Amar to engage his guest for a quarter of an hour. The Samajwadi leader, looking unsettled till then, relaxed and beamed.

In addition to the dinner diplomacy, the prime minister had also relied on a senior IAS officer in his PMO who had an excellent rapport with the Samajwadi Party leadership. This official, who has the distinction of working in Vajpayee’s and Deve Gowda’s PMO too, is said to have been used as a sounding board for well over a year. The Left leaders privately pointed at Amar’s frequent visits to the US in 2007-08 to insinuate that he had a role to play in the pro-deal lobby in Washington. But sources close to Amar denied it, clarifying that his visits were either personal or related to medical treatment.
The personal rapport between Mulayam’s son Akhilesh and Rahul Gandhi too is said to have helped the two parties reach an understanding. Akhilesh, a year younger to the Gandhi scion, was initially touted as a challenger to Rahul in Uttar Pradesh. He had extensively campaigned for Raj Kumar Chaudhary; the man the Samajwadi Party had pitted against Sonia in 2006 when she sought re-election after resigning on the issue of office of profit. Sonia’s campaign manager was Rahul. The Samajwadi Party knew that their candidate had no chance of winning the election but they did not want to give the Congress a walkover. The proud father was even heard commenting, ‘So what if Rahul stirs the youth force, we have Akhilesh.’

But as the MP from Kannauj spent time in Parliament and in the Central Hall, he developed a sneaking admiration for Rahul, his integrity, his childlike innocence and his ability to strike a friendship with young MPs cutting across party lines. Omar Abdullah for instance had little to do with the Congress or the UPA but Akhilesh was always struck by Rahul’s warmth towards the National Conference leader. What was more revealing was that, despite the mutual admiration, when it came to discussing politics or the burning issues of the day, the two argued loudly and remained glued to their respective party positions.

In Rahul, Manmohan found a powerful votary of the N-deal. Unlike his mother whom the Left viewed as having her heart slightly left of centre, Rahul projected himself as an unabashed supporter of economic reforms and whatever Manmohan stood for. When the stand-off on the N-deal reached its crescendo, Rahul stood up to be counted among those behind Manmohan, lauding the prime minister’s ‘bold’ stand on the deal. In fact, a few days before the crucial trust vote in Parliament, he even went on to suggest that it was worth sacrificing a government to uphold ‘national interest and principles’. If the government fell because of the prime minister’s stand, Rahul said-hastening to add in the same breath ‘it will not go, of
of course’, it was ‘simply bad luck’. ‘But in politics, it is more important to stand for national interest and principles,’ the young MP told the CWC at Sonia’s residence.

Rahul told the Congress’s apex decision-making body that it was important to consider the positive effects of the deal that allowed India to separate its civilian and military nuclear facilities, pursue defence programmes and bring in the option of clean energy. He and Sonia agreed with the prime minister that the deal was a ‘unique achievement’.

With the victory in the trust vote a new Manmohan Singh seems to have emerged. When he had presented his first budget seventeen years ago, as finance minister in Narasimha Rao’s Cabinet, few in the Congress had thought that the quiet, ‘apolitical’ minister was capable of transforming into a confident leader of the country. By July 2008, ‘politician’ Manmohan had arrived—and was here to stay. In fact, in the party’s 123-year-old history, Manmohan’s emergence has been unique. The Congress had leaders of stature in the past who enjoyed excellent rapport with the Family. But the likes of Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, Babu Jagjivan Ram, YB. Chavan, M. Chenna Reddy and H.N. Bahuguna mostly worked under a Nehru-Gandhi prime minister. Manmohan Singh has emerged as a leader in his own right, though skeptics would hasten to add that he was ‘hand-picked’ by a member of the Family in the first place. That, however, does little justice to the man’s inherent reservoirs of strength, political acumen and integrity.

Party officials have begun to believe that Manmohan, Sonia and Rahul can leash the whims of mercurial allies such as the Samajwadi Party and the JMM with a mixture of accommodation, reason and firmness. They are confident of the government surviving the remaining part of the term. If only the now politically savvy troika can deliver them another term in office.
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