CHAPTER-II

SONIA GANDHI – ENTRY INTO POLITICS
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Sonia had a great aversion to politics. When Indira and Rajiv were alive, Sonia showed indifference to power and glory. There was not a single instance of Sonia attending any public function or holding any public office during her powerful mother-in-law's tenure as prime minister. After Rajiv became Prime Minister, then also she maintained her detachment from public life and office. She could have any public office for the asking but never showed any interest for it. After her husband's death, she still showed no such interest. For her dislike to politics she spurned every request of the Congress leaders to enter into it for long seven years. She even opposed Rajiv tooth and nail from entering it. Rajiv later explained this aversion saying, Sonia felt she would be losing me.

The Congress leaders continued their appeal to her to join politics. They felt that being a member of the Nehru-Gandhi family she would be an asset for the party. When she refused the appeal just after her husband's assassination, the party installed veteran leader P.V. Narasimha Rao as party chief and subsequently as prime minister. His government was more or less stable, though the name of the party was sullied under him as never before over the incident of Babri mosque demolition. When Rao demitted office, Sonia again got the offer to become Congress chief. Then also she refused to accept the post. After her refusal, veteran Congress man Sitaram Kesri became the party President. Kesri, however, couldn't keep the Congress leaders united. The party started sinking under him as it was losing elections and the party men were drifting away to either join another party or form a new party (Mamata Banerjee formed Trinamool Congress in 1997). This was the reason the Congress
leaders were putting constant pressure on Sonia to take the party’s command. Many Congress leaders were unhappy with Kesri’s style of functioning. They began to term him as ‘liability’ for the party. Many leaders, namely Mani Shankar Aiyar, Suresh Kalmadi, Buta Singh, Aslam Sher Khan left the party and many more were willing to leave it. Senior leaders again urged Sonia, to name a few Jitenrdra Prasada, Vijay Bhaskar Reddy, Arjun Singh, K. Karunakaran, Sharad Pawar, to take the party’s command. The young Turkš didn’t lag behind. Leaders such as Ahmed Patel, Vayalar Ravi, Kamal Nath, Ashok Gehlot were repeatedly asking her to play active role in the party. They feared that under Kesri’s leadership, the party couldn’t be saved from its declining trend.

After much persuasion, at the end of 1997 as the nation was going for General elections, Sonia agreed to campaign for the party. Her first meeting was at Seriiperimbudur. She addressed many election meetings. As a result of her campaigning the party won many seats that were quite unexpected. Congress leaders credited her for this.

Sonia remained away from politics up to 1998. Party leaders continued their appeal, asking her to become leader of the party. Kesri also announced that he would step down in favour of her. The leaders almost lost patience. Those close to Sonia went to her residence and made their intention clear. The leaders wanted Kesri to immediately step down, but he was not prepared for that. The situation came to such a pass that at last she deemed it proper to give acquiescence. The Congress Working Committee (CWC) met and approved Sonia’s name.

**BECOMES CONGRESS CHIEF**

On April 6, 1998 the All India Congress Committee (AICC) ratified Sonia’s appointment as President of the organisation. She became the third woman to hold
the prestigious post after Annie Besant and Neli Sengupta and the fifth from the Nehru family—the other fours were Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. She became primary member of the party just months before the Kolkata plenary in August 1997.

It was a matter of great rejoicing for the Congress leaders that party's responsibility had been conferred upon Sonia. They believed that under her efficient leadership a political regeneration would develop and the country march towards path of progress.

As Sonia became President of the Congress, there prevailed unity in the party. She also took steps to revamp the organisation. But more than a year later she had to face revolt from some of the party leaders who themselves repeatedly requested her to take plunge into politics. Three party leaders - Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma and Tariq Anwar - waged an open revolt against Sonia on the issue of her foreign origin. They became critical of the Congress for failing to get a qualified Indian for its President and for projecting her as prime ministerial candidate.

To convey resentment, the trio later submitted their resignations to her. Realising that she was the cause of the turmoil in the party, she too conveyed to the CWC members her decision to stay away. However, the CWC rejected her resignation and decided to remain solidly behind her. When the CWC members called on her, she told them that she was deeply hurt by the attitude of some party leaders about her foreign origin.

Despite several attempts, the rebels couldn’t be persuaded to withdraw their resignations. In another meeting, the CWC decided to expel the rebels for violating party discipline. The CWC members continued to put pressure on her to reconsider
her decision. Fully knowing that she was indispensable for the party, she decided to take back her resignation.

Sonia believes in true democracy. In 1999 she was elected party President first time through the process of ballot. Veteran Congress leader Jitendra Prasada contested against her. But it was a one-sided fight from the word ‘go’. After the Congress party regained power at the Centre in 2004, election was again held for party President. In 2005 she was again elected President second time by overwhelming support. Although the election schedule was announced, no leader came forward to contest the post, as they knew that it was she who would be the ideal choice. Presumably she was declared re-elected unopposed. The five-member bench of the election committee declared Sonia’s unanimous election after scrutiny of the nomination papers, all of which were in her favour. Out of the total 100 nomination papers, 97 were found valid. The official announcement was only a matter of formality as no nomination was filed against her.

Under Sonia’s able leadership, the Congress party was in power in 15 states in just six years. Even her detractors commend her for role in holding the party together. However, she maintains that she is “no saviour” of the party.

With humble submission Sonia said, “I am grateful to the workers and leaders for having reposed faith in me. Despite the fact that we have come to power after eight years and leading a coalition government we have to be alert and to work relentlessly to strengthen the organisation.

Sonia took over the reins of the party when it was on the verge of crumbling. Many people, not knowledgeable about the realities of the party, often argue that the number of Members of Parliament during Kesri’s leadership was more as compared to Sonia’s time. Although the argument seems to be correct, the truth is that during
Kesri's tenure the morale of the workers was so low that if it had not been Sonia's entry into politics, the Congress would have been reduced to double-digit figures. The evidence of the damage that was caused to the party in several states during the tenures of Rao and Kesri were there as many party activists later admitted how they attempted to rebuild the party from scrap.

The Nehru dynasty is indispensable for the Congress. It has led the Congress and the country for 37 post-Independence years out of 42, with breaks only in 1964-66 (Lal Bahadur Shastri) and 1977-1980 (Morarji Desai of Janata Party). When non-Congress governments ruled the country, people had little hope from them and remained confused over governments' stability. Sonia stepped into politics when the party was in Opposition. It was really an uphill task for her to revive the party because first, she was a political novice and second, she was of foreign origin.

Sonia persevered continuously for the party's success. At the time of elections she did maximum campaigning. First came the success in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in 1998. In later years the party won several elections. The political pundits earlier had given up hope about the future of the Congress party but she had not only revived it but also brought it to power in three states that were ruled by the BJP. Slowly and surely more than half the country came to the party's fold. Obviously with such a success she has proved that she is not an average politician. Under her leadership, the party is consolidating on its lost base. In Maharashtra, several prominent Shiv Sena leaders have joined the party. In Karnataka also same thing happened. The party under her continues to be the largest political formation in the country.

Along with the success were the challenges. Sonia had to face the onslaught of the adversaries over her foreign origin. The three rebel leaders had formed a separate entity, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). They made her foreign origin main
plank during election campaigns. However, the foreigner issue remained buried ever since the Supreme Court gave its verdict on this matter. The controversy over her origin also went to the back burner with Pawar relenting. He said at the NCP conclave in Mumbai, “Our ego had grown taller than our height.”

The trio were repeatedly saying that Sonia couldn’t be elected as prime minister because of her foreign origin. Sonia, however, lashed out at Pawar for raising doubts about her identity and nationality. In 2002 Pawar’s NCP delinked the issue of Sonia’s origin. NCP’s Praful Pate admitted that there was no constitutional, legal or democratic bar to her possible claim to prime ministership. His argument against such a claim was that it was a matter of sentiment. If majority of the people want her to be at that post, what we can do, he said.

As President of the party, Sonia had generated a wave of enthusiasm among the leaders and cadres. With her family background as well as on her personal capacity, she rejuvenated the party that had been bereft of a charismatic leader. She also resurrected the Nehru-Gandhi ideology, thus adding a dynamic dimension to its affairs. She stands for highest ideals of the party, which are secularism and progress. Sonia is now a matured politician. Her guidance and ability in cobbling the coalition and running its government successfully are the shining examples of her maturity. Her political maturity can be gauged from the fact that she alone was instrumental in shaping the coalition and now takes no pains in resolving differences that appears between the Congress party and the supporting partners in the course of running the government.

PERSONALITY

Sonia’s dignified behaviour, enigmatic image and towering personality fascinate all. She is a principled person and knows very well her duty towards one
and all. She also has a helpful disposition. She believes in simplicity and is a strong votaress of austerity. She is for full implementation of what has been preached. Sonia's real power is her acceptability as a leader by the Congressmen. With her courteous behaviour, sophisticated persona and refined deportment, she has become persona grata to them. By her kind and compassioned nature plus subtle temperament, she has won the hearts of crores of people-rich and poor alike. Her popularity increased by leaps and bounds and soon became a household name all over the country.

On her part, Sonia has fully dedicated herself to the service of the Congress party and the people. Crave for pelf and power never overpowered her earnest desire to work for the betterment of the downtrodden. She has expounded the dogma-purity in thought, politeness in speech and active in action. She is also a great mediator-intervenes promptly when workers' or weaker sections' interests are affected.

Sonia spends most of the time in thinking of the welfare of the people. She is always prepared to assist people in every way she can and this comes out of her sincere love for them. There is no selfishness at all. She never thinks what she can get from others but thinks what she can give to them. To ameliorate the sufferings of the poor and the needy, she holds durbar at her residence. Many disgruntled soles come to her for help.

The two persons on whom Sonia depends most for emotional supports are Rahul and Priyanka. When a very important decision is to be taken she consults only with them. Even the close coteries are not told about such decisions. Although Priyanka is busy with her kids, she speaks to her mother several times in a day. Sonia's emergence into the political arena and her evolving as a political persona were all done with Rahul and Priyanka's approval.
Congress leaders generally don’t have access to close family interactions. In fact, Sonia is such a reticent person that she will not reveal her feelings to even close friends. She has metamorphosed to a woman of greater determination. Shedding shyness she has emerged as a much more combative woman. Earlier she was not willing to come out from her private world, now she has bestowed herself fully to public service—remaining busy the whole day meeting people and holding consultations.

ABLE LEADER

Several assembly results have proved that Sonia is providing good leadership to the party. The opponents always fear about her masterstroke because she knows the art of political maneuvering by which she can take the wind out of the opponents’ sails.

Besides showing mettle on political field, she has basic compassionate attitude. She has the caring quality and feels bad when innocent people become victims of mischievous acts perpetrated by others. Some of the common traits that strike one’s mind are that she shows promptness in mitigating the sufferings of the people who are affected by some way or the other. Her visits to Varanasi and Mumbai in the wake of serial blasts or to Meerut when a major fire tore through a consumer goods fair in which more than 60 people got burnt and over 120 injured or her meeting with the quake-affected people of Jammu and Kashmir tell it all. She thinks for well-being of others, particularly the poor and the women. For their benefit several laws have been enacted under her initiative. Her other remarkable features are right attitude and credibility.

Sonia’s approach is constructive and has foresightedness. Her goals do not end up in a utopia. She visualises the future precisely. She has faith in subordinates
and delegates responsibilities to them and watch them perform well. She has set an example that is unmatched. Sonia doesn’t like publicity for herself. Several times she urged the party men to desist from this. Her observation at the AJCC meeting held in New Delhi in 2004 is a pointer to this effect. When chants of Sonia Gandhi Zindabad rent the air she pointed out that had the speakers concentrated less on praising her, they could have come up with something substantive. At Hyderabad plenary also she strongly disapproved of her eulogisation and asked party men not to praise her too much. “There is no need to speak too much about me,” she said.

Sonia’s speech is remarkable for simplicity and forcefulness. Whatever she says, it comes from her heart. The following oneliner best substantiates the observation: Desh aur samaj ke vikas mein Kendra ki bhumika kafi badi hai. Jab tak hum Kendra me in shashan na hi karenge, desh ka vikas sambhav nahin hai (The government has a key role to perform in transforming society. Till such time as the Congress does not come to power at the Centre, no proper development can take place). This is how she convinced people.

Sonia has the unique ability to keep the flock together and put down rebellion. She doesn’t hesitate to use her authority in the party. Sometimes a situation comes when a tricky problem is to be solved or more than one claimant via for a position. Then she has the final say. No one in the party can muster courage to go against her decision.

The Congress is a democratic party and to maintain discipline within the party Sonia has advised the party men to use appropriate fora to vent their grievances. She has always been able to overcome threats from other parties but it came to the notice that party leaders sometimes criticize their own government. Such things cause her embarrassment. According to her, the ‘enemy within’ is more destructive than the ‘enemy outside’. She laments that the party men talk against own government. When
the party loses election the party men make irresponsible statement, which harms the spirit of the cadres. She advised the party workers to desist from factional feuds and instead strengthen the organisation through united efforts.

Sonia urged the workers that it was the responsibility of everybody to keep the monumental heritage intact. "We should shun a narrow-minded approach and broaden our vision and mindset. Infighting will weaken the party so the workers should take a pledge to work shoulder to shoulder." She believes that only Congress can deliver unselfish service to the poor.

SONIA GANDHI TAKES OVER THE CONGRESS

It was in the third week of December 1997 that Sonia Gandhi first indicated her willingness to take a more active role in politics. She chose Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay 'Diggy Raja' Singh to break the news. He had called on her complaining against the Congress chief Sitaram Kesri. For him and many other party leaders, Kesri was more of a liability than an asset. The old man who avoided contesting direct elections had no vision or mass appeal. For him, the route to success was simple-plea, petition and manipulation. Behind a simple Gandhian profile, Kesri was a shrewd politician with a knack of being on the winning side. He had cut many deals and annoyed many party men. Kesri had survived for decades, but once he took over as the Congress chief, his flaws as a leader became glaringly obvious.

Singh did not mince words in saying that under Kesri the Congress was heading towards disaster. As long as Kesri was head of the Congress, the party would not even get 100 seats in the Lok Sabha polls that were announced in January 1998.

Sonia attentively heard Singh's formulation and then casually asked. What will happen if I campaign for the Congress?" He could not believe his ears. 'Madam, that would electrify our rank and file. We will sweep the polls!' He could visualize
Sonia addressing mammoth public meetings in his state. To him, it was a reminder of the heady days of Rajiv in 1984 that marked Singh’s debut in the Lok Sabha. He could hardly forget how Rajiv had made him Congress unit chief of Madhya Pradesh in 1987 although he lacked experience. Rajiv had sounded him for the coveted post, and Singh blurted it out to his mentor Arjun Singh who, in turn, quickly approached Rajiv offering his services for the job! Rajiv summoned Digvijay wondering how Arjun came to know about a private conversation between them. ‘It was an important political lesson for me,’ he later recalled, admitting that Rajiv’s trust in him made him a 10 Janpath loyalist for ever.

Dig Vijay Singh was not alone in labelling Kesri a liability for the Congress or in being a beneficiary of the benevolent acts of the Nehru-Gandhi family. By December 1997, barring a handful of Kesri loyalists, virtually everyone had turned against him. Ahmad Patel, Kamal Nath, Vayalar Ravi, Ashok Gehlot and dozens of Young Turks frequently met Sonia to remind her of her historic responsibility to save the nation from fascist forces. As a member of the great family, she could not escape her responsibilities. Patel told her. ‘Millions of party workers are willing to die for you. How can you allow the collapse of the Congress before your eyes,’ Gehlot said, pointing at the large-scale desertion in the party Aslam Sher Khan, Mani Shankar Aiyar, Suresh Kalmadi, Buta Singh and P.R. Kumarmangalam were some of the prominent leaders who had left the party. Kumarmangalam died soon thereafter, but one by one, Aiyar, Buta and Kalmadi returned to the parent organization once Sonia took over as AICC chief. The old guard of the Congress was also at work. Fed up with Kesri’s antics, leaders like K. Karunakaran, Arjun Singh, A.K. Antony, Jitendra Prasada, Vijay Bhaskar Reddy, M.N. Gadgil and Madhav Sinh Solanki kept exerting pressure on Sonia to intervene. Arjun Singh and Prasada, who had masterminded the collapse of the I.K. Gujral government on the basis of the Jain Commission report, gently reminded her of the need to reciprocate the feelings of the Congress workers
who could not tolerate the presence of two DMK ministers in a government supported by the Congress.

The moral pressure of the Rajiv assassination probe was, in fact, a turning point. It was one issue that could make the Family overcome its reluctance to take an active role in politics. Arjun Singh was the first to identify the weak spot months after Rao took over as the Prime Minister in 1991. He began attending virtually all the sittings of the Verma and Jam commission hearings, sending details of the proceedings to 10 Janpath. At first they got no response. Rahul and Priyanka were also regularly seen at the Vigyan Bhavan annexed where the hearings were taking place. But Singh's bid to strike rapport with them did not succeed, since the Gandhi children remained aloof from Congress politicians.

The sum and substance of Arjun's campaign was that unless Sonia took a more active political role, the Rajiv assassination probe would not make any headway, and the real culprits of the dastardly act and the key conspirators might even get away. A secondary part of his campaign was that the Rao government had a sinister design in scuttling the probe—a charge that gained momentum when Arjun Singh resigned from the Rao government in December 1994. Many Congress leaders also felt that Sonia was not convinced that the LTTE was solely responsible for Rajiv's assassination. She was of the view that the LTTE may have been a willing agent for other agencies involved in that dastardly act.

Arjun Singh's detractor Jitendra Prasada used the same ploy to get even with Kesri, which resulted in the downfall of the Gujral government. Like Singh, Prasada hired a battery of lawyers to examine the bulky jam Commission report, picking instances that seemed to link the DMK with the LTTE.

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Amidst these behind-the-scenes deliberations, Sonia too had began putting aside her contempt for politics. Events in the past few years had altered her thinking. The betrayal of Narasimha Rao, the tardy progress in the Rajiv assassination probe, the ever-declining fortunes of the Congress and all-round attack on the Nehru-Gandhi legacy weighed heavily in favour of testing the uncertain waters of politics.

It was at this juncture that Sonia fell out with Amitabh Bachchan. Bachchan was completely against Sonia entering politics. He described Congress leaders as vultures who wanted to cash in on the Nehru-Gandhi family’s appeal to serve their political ends. For the first time in thirty years, he and Sonia were not on the same wavelength. While Sonia saw some merit in what Amit was saying, she stayed with her decision.

That choice marked a painful parting between the two families. Bachchan began distancing himself from 10 Janpath, feeling let down, and he was quietly dropped as a trustee of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Years later when Bachchan invited Sonia to the premiere of his son Abhishek’s first film, Refugee, Sonia declined the invitation pointing out that as the Congress president she could not go to a five-star hotel. A few days later, however, she was spotted in a five-star hotel at a party thrown by Congress leader Subbi Rami Reddy.

Meanwhile, blissfully unaware of the developments at 10 Janpath, ‘Chacha’ Sitaram Kesri was busy trying to build a band of loyalists for himself Kesri knew that the party MPs were unhappy over the manner in which he pulled down the United Front governments of H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K Gujral. His relations with 10 Janpath had taken a beating over his reluctance to bring down Gujral’s government over the Jam Commission report. Kesri was bitter that Arjun Singh and Prasada had succeeded in projecting him as a villain in Sonia’s eyes. He tried to patch things up and paid several visits to her, but he failed to gauge her mood. ‘There was something
in her eyes that made me uneasy, but I had no idea that she was going to take the plunge or dump me so unceremoniously,' Kesri later told his friends in the media, blaming Singh and Prasada for spoiling his otherwise 'excellent rapport' with her.

After all, as welfare minister between 1991 and 1996, Kesri had given standing orders to his ministry officials to clear all projects of the RGF on priority basis. With Sonia as head of the RGF, Kesri thought that his gesture would keep him in her good books. Kesri's logic was simple. A lot of money under his ministry earmarked for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) was going unused or disappearing into the hands of unscrupulous elements. Kesri thought he was killing two birds with one stone. 'Sarkari paisa ham Agar Indira ke parivar ke paasja raha hai to kya boorai hai (It is government money. Even if it is going to Indira's family, I see no harm),' Kesri told sonic journalists.1

Kesri had severe limitations as the president of the Congress. Leaders from the south and the North-East had a problem communicating with him, and partymen from the north never accepted Kesri as their leader due to caste considerations! After all, the Congress had retained its upper-caste character in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and elsewhere. Kesri also made his dislike for the north Indian Brahmins and thakurs obvious. He was open about forging a grand alliance with the likes of Laloo Prasad Yadav Kanshi Ram and Mulayam Singh Yadav. His views unnerved a large section of upper-caste leaders from the Hindi heartland who were already struggling to survive, losing successive Lok Sabha polls with huge margins. Kesri's promise to 'Mandalize' the Congress made them sit up, as they were now about to lose their position within the organization too.

Kesri, who came from a modest background and had no formal education, also began priding himself as a commoner who was elected by the party rank and file. Though everyone within the Congress and outside it viewed the organizational polls
that concluded in Calcutta in September 1997 as farcical, Kesri took the compliment of elected AICC chief too seriously. His commoner reference was taken as a sign of defiance towards Sonia and the Nehru-Gandhi family. To make matters worse, between Kesri and 10 Janpath, a handful of former MPs systematically began passing on bits of information and gossip to Vincent George exaggerating what Kesri was saying about Sonia and her loyalists. One leader from Madhya Pradesh told George, 'He says he will finish off the Nehru-Gandhi family,' and quoted Kesri as saying, 'The days of rajas and maharajas are over.

The veteran leader was himself a great storyteller and gossip, with a view on virtually everything. Ek baat bata deten ham (Let me tell you something), he would start. The tale he loved to tell was how Rajendra Babu (Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President) had a great liking for him. Prasad had visited Danapur and spotted the young freedom fighter in him. 'I went to jail several times,' Kesri would recount, exposing his back to show the spots where he received lashes from the 'lal pagris', as the lathi-wielding Raj police in Bihar were called.

Kesri's detractors had a different story claiming that young Kesri was booked under hoarding charges during the Second World War. Kesri's take on this was that the British used to deliberately come up with charges such as this to malign freedom fighters.

Sometimes Kesri would speak of how Subhash Chandra Bose was greater than Jawaharlal Nehru. I was part of the Forward Bloc and Netaji's team in Calcutta,' he would say, closing his eyes. He would ruminate on how India would have been different if Gandhiji had not made a mistake in picking Nehru instead of Bose. The non-violent pacifist would give way to the radical Kesri. We have a slave mentality. We have not got freedom after shedding blood. The non-violent method made us Impotent. Had Subhash been around, the country would have been different,' Kesri
would say, propagating a theory that the Nehru-led, Delhi-centric Congress consciously suppressed leadership from Bengal. ‘From Bose to Marnata Banerjee, it is the same story of suppression and injustice,’ Kesri would tell a flabbergasted audience that was left wondering how Bose could be compared to Banerjee.²

In the same breath, he recalled his proximity to some Bollywood actresses and how he used to borrow money from former AICC chief Dev Kanta Borooah to visit Bombay! The courtiers would delightfully chip in: ‘One day an actress came to see Kesriji when I was present. She said, “Main aap ke pass chhoti see aas lke kar aayi hun (I have come to you seeking a small favour).” I felt like telling her-please don’t lie. You do not have a chhoti ass!’ The bawdy joke drew hysterical laughter from all quarters including Kesri.

He reached the party headquarters at 2.30 p.m., but an hour before the scheduled press meet at 4 p.m., a small note from 10 Janpath ruined his mood. A lowly functionary, Tom Vaddakan,³ ran through a small passage between 10 Janpath and 24 Akbar Road carrying an announcement from Vincent George that said Sonia would campaign for the Congress in the general elections.

Initially Vaddakan was not allowed to take Sonia’s message to Kesri. The guard outside Kesri’s room would not let him in. ‘It is important and if you do not let me in, you will lose your job,’ an irritated Vaddakan said, but the guard was unfazed. ‘Sahib does not want to be disturbed,’ he said matter-of-factly. Suddenly, Tom saw Harish Khare, a journalist from the Hindu who had an appointment with Kesri. ‘Sir, please pass this on to him. It is from 10 Janpath and the guard is not letting me in.’ Khare took the note and gave it to Kesri.

Kesri’s face fell the moment he finished reading it. He struggled to respond, mumbling to himself, Sub kuch khatarn. Wo aa rahi hai (It is all over. She is
coming). Kesri then broke the news to Khare. Interestingly, Kesri did not address the briefing to make the announcement, notwithstanding his scores of public statements requesting Sonia to help out the party. It was left to MN. Gadgil to make the announcement to the world.

It was a surprising gesture from Kesri not to hog the limelight that day. After all, when Madhavrao SC India and S. Bangarappa, former Karnataka chief minister, returned to the parent organization, Kesri was there to receive them in the AICC portico and escort them to the briefing room before making a formal announcement. Sources close to Kesri later admitted that the old man was keen to welcome Sonia but decided against it. He was reminded of the designs of his detractors like Arjun Singh and Jitendra Prasada who were using 10 Janpath to dislodge him. Kesri also realized that it was not befitting of an elected AICC chief to be seen as playing second fiddle to Sonia.

When the news of Kesri’s defiance reached 10 Janpath, Sonia began wondering if she had taken the correct course. She suddenly realized that her entry would not be as Arjun Singh, Kamal Nath and others. Her mind raced back to a statement made by a close family friend who had vehemently opposed her decision to enter public life. ‘I have been a Congress MP I know the party too well. It is a snake-pit. You will soon realize that the most trusted persons can turn against you.’ The prediction turned out to be true on several occasions. In Sonia’s own words I joined politics. But yes, it pained me when I saw people who had repeatedly requested me to take the plunge level baseless allegations against me and leave the party’. The reference was to PA. Sangma, Tariq Anwar and Sharad Pawar in May 1999.

Sonia shrugged off the idea of withdrawing her move. She foresaw a dismal future for the Congress if she did not join the party The AICC treasurer, Ahmad
Patel, helped her articulate these ideas in a presentation produced with the aid of a professional agency. It said that the Congress would disintegrate into several factions and the BJP would gain strength and undermine the country's secular fabric. The inference was clear-join the Congress and you will have millions of party workers willing to die for the honour of the family.

Sonia was not unaware of the points made by the presentation. As the slides played out the scenario, Sonia firmed up her mind. I am a fighter, and I will overcome the handicaps,' she told herself In the back of her mind was the sequence of events that resulted in the fall of the later, Sonia told some family friends that destiny ensured apolitical role for her. 'I was dead opposed to it. In fact, in 1991 I was shocked and considered Congressmen extremely insensitive when the CWC passed a resolution asking me to take over as the party chief. Seven years after, I just could not resist,' she admitted.4

The choice of 28 December 1997 was not without significant. It was the 112th anniversary of the Indian National Congress. The general elections were announced and the Congress state election committees, central election committee and other important bodies that allot tickets to aspirants were to meet on 3 and 4 January 1998. As the Congress president, Kesri had a final say, but Sonia's arrival spoilt everything. In the meetings that took place, Kesri was reduced to a puppet. Each day, general secretary Oscar Fernandez would bring a file from 10 Janpath that was reportedly sent by Vincent George, and Kesri was expected to clear all the names. Kesri suspected that Arjun Singh was acting in concert with George and that the duo was keeping Sonia in the dark, but the old man could never muster the courage to complain against George, though he met Sonia a number of times. Each time he said that proper persons were not getting party tickets. Sonia would say, 'Kesriji, please consult Arjun Singhji and Madhavrao!'
The New Year brought chaos. The Kesri camp was busy protecting it as the ‘year of Kesri’ while Sonia’s managers were finalizing venues for her debut and consulting astrologers. On 11 January 1998, Sripurumbudur became the venue of her first public meeting. Requests from prospective candidates pleading that Sonia should touch their constituency flooded 10 Janpath. She was seen as their passport to success.

Vincent George suddenly became extremely busy. Helping him were dozens of loyal workers who were experts in a range of subjects, Congress history and culture among them. It was an elite band of experts that used to help Rajiv. A place’s historical importance, link to Indira and Rajiv, and caste and religious considerations were some of the factors that were taken into account in chalking out Sonia’s itinerary. After all, she was ‘Indira II’ in the making. She first needed to regain the confidence of the traditional vote bank - the poor, tribals and weaker sections, the Muslims and other minorities.

As Congressmen made a beeline for 10 Janpath, there was a sharp decline in the number of visitors at Kesri’s 7 Purana Qua Road residence. Only the usual hanger-ones remained. Each day Kesri was confronted with more bad news. For among the points Sonia made in her speeches was that all was not well with the Congress. She made it clear that she would not confine herself to campaigning for the party but would continue to play an active role in politics even after the elections.

For the first time in the history of the Congress, the party president was kept away from campaigning. None of the states, including his own state Bihar, sought Kesri’s services. The old man tried to visit Jalandhar, but the aircraft had to turn around while flying over Ambala as Kesri developed a breathing problem in the unpressurized cabin. Azad later said that he remained extremely tense till the aircraft
landed at Palarn. ‘I was seriously worried about Chacha’s health. He appeared in acute pain, almost choking.’

The outcome of the elections to the twelfth Lok Sabha came as a shock to the Congress. In the back-breaking campaign that saw Sonia address 130-odd meetings, the Congress’s final tally read 142. Besides handing over the family borough of Amethi to the BJP she could not save two of her most trusted lieutenants, Arjun Singh and Narain Dutt Tiwari, who lost in Hoshangabad (Madhya Pradesh) and Naini Tal (then in Uttar Pradesh). But her managers quickly put the blame on Kesri, who had not stepped out of his house. They said that owing to organizational weaknesses, the party filed to cash in on Sonia’s charisma. She accepted the argument and agreed to take direct control of the party, insisting, however, that Kesri step down gracefully and invite her to take over. Chacha was in no mood to oblige her.

Restless CWC members began holding conclaves to work out plans on how to install Sonia. The task was left to Kesri’s two favourite nephews—Ahmad Patel and Azad—to sound him out about retiring gracefully. But Kesri had off the proposal ‘You have been sent by Arjun Singh and George. It cannot be Soniaji’s words. If she wants me out, let her say so,’ Chacha said.

Sharad Pawar too joined the ‘Kesri hatao’ campaign. He was getting feedback from Mumbai and the corporate world that said that as long as Kesri was head of the party, the industrial houses would riot support it. Pawar teamed up with Prasada and A.K. Antony, and later Pranab Mukherjee joined in. Every week the senior leaders would meet in small groups to review the situation. Invariably Pawar would favour a ‘surgical operation’, but Mukherjee and Antony would seek more time.

Sensing trouble, the Kesri camp launched a counter-offensive. The first casualties were the CWC meetings that had to be convened by the party chief Kesri
was advised not to call the CWC as it might ask him to step down. Kesri was convinced that the party constitution gave him ultimate powers and that as long as he was the elected chief, nobody would dare to remove him.

The CWC finally met on 5 March 1998 to assess the party’s poor performance in the general elections. The outcome of the meeting was significant on two counts. First, it asked Sonia to play a more direct and meaningful role and requested her to help the party elect the new leader of the CPP, a post that Kesri occupied. Kesri was upset with Mukherjee and Pawar, and he later told Tariq Anwar, ‘If Sharad thinks he can become CPP leader, tell him to forget it. Soniaji will never let it happen.’ Kesri was proved right for soon after Sonia took over, she got herself elected as the CPP leader though she was not a member of Parliament. The CPP constitution was amended to state that any party leader was live to get elected to its parliamentary body even if he/she was not a member of either House?

After the Ahmad Azad mission failed, three senior leaders, Dr Manmohan Singh, Pranab Mukherjee and A.K. Antony, approached Kesri. The trio acknowledged Kesri’s services but told him that a change of guard was in the interest of the party. Antony said Sonia was willing to take over. Surrounded by senior colleagues, Kesri was at a loss for words. He said, ‘If you wise persons feel that l am coming in the way of reviving the party I will step down. But I will have a word with Madam.’ The leaders thought their mission was successful, but Kesri cleverly used the opportunity to buy more time. He began sounding out CWC members, and much to his dismay, he realized that except for Tariq Anwar, all of them had switched sides.

Kesri then called on Sonia declaring that he was willing to step down as the party chief if she was going to take over from him. Much to his horror, Sonia gently asked him, ‘When?’ The old man was crestfallen. He could not take on Sonia. After all, it was Indira Gandhi who made him AICC treasurer. The bravado of being
elected AICC chief was nowhere in sight. Kesri promised to hold a press conference to make the formal announcement. For once, he kept his word and did not share his intention even with his close associates. These included some prominent journalists who were his political advisers.

On 9 March, Kesri announced his resignation, but within minutes he changed his mind. Kesri claimed that he had merely stated his intention to step down, though all the major newspapers quoted him as saying that he had resigned. Chacha’s coterie chided him for handing over power to Sonia on a platter. Kesri rephrased his comments claiming that he would place his resignation before the AICC general body meeting, which has over 1000 delegates, so as to seek their approval. They have elected me, and I will seek their permission,’ he told the press. But nobody took the statement seriously. Azad, Patel, Arjun Singh and other CWC members quickly called on Sonia, taking credit for the success.

Over the next few days, Kesri went on giving interviews that he had not resigned and that the leadership issue would be settled by the AICC. Number 10 Janpath summoned loyal CWC members seeking an explanation. ‘Oh, Chacha is upset over adverse publicity. He is a rustic fellow,’ a GWC member told Sonia, as he boasted that he would set everything in order. ‘I have consulted astrologers who say 14 March is an auspous to take over,’ he said, but Sonia only nodded warily.

Antony, Mukherjee and Dr Singli again called on Kesri, but the old man was in a bad mood this time. ‘You wanted me to resign. I have done it,’ he said bluntly, even refusing to offer a cup of tea to them. Pranab cleared his throat and asked, ‘When should the CWC meet?’ That remark infuriated Kesri who shot back, ‘It is up to me to decide.’ The trio faithfully reported the incident to Sonia.
A day before the coup, on 14 March, he hosted a lunch at which all CWC members except for the Orissa Chief Minister, J.B. Patnaik, and his Mizo counterpart, Laithanhawla, were present. Thirteen CWC members gathered at Pranab's house at 9.30 am. to draft a strongly worded resolution that asked Kesri to immediately convene a CWC meet to end the uncertainty in the wake of his decision to resign as the party chief. It said that Kesri's gesture had bewildered party workers all over the country and he should step down in Sonia’s favour. Pranab discovered a provision in the Congress constitution that supposedly empowered the CWC to take drastic action under very special circumstances. Party leaders later admitted that the provision did not specifically say it had powers to remove an elected party president.

The maneuvering reached its nadir on the fateful day. As soon as the CWC met at 11 a.m., Kesri began protesting over the minutes of the meeting. He became hysterical when Pranab thanked him. Chacha adjourned the meeting within eight minutes and retired to his office adjacent to the hail where the CWC was meeting at 24 Akbar Road. No amount of persuasion from Dr. Singh, Mukherjee, Antony and Patel changed his mind. Those in favour of change had anticipated it all the chair signaling Pranab to move the resolution formally to invite Sonia to take over. The lone Kesri loyalist, Tariq Anwar, followed his leader, refusing to be party to 'the unconstitutional and unprecedented measures' that were being adopted by the CWC. He staged a walkout.

The remaining WG methods then rush nath. At about noon, the committee formally handed over the chair to her. Kesri’s nameplate was quickly removed and through into the dustbin and a sparkling black-and-white plaque bearing Sonia’s name was fixed outside the Congress president’s office well ahead of her arrival at the party headquarters. Sonia came to Akbar Road at 5.30 to chair the CWC meet and take over as the party chief. She looked bright and confident for the occasion, but she
was not pleased about the circumstances in which she was taking over. 'It would have been a lot better if everything had gone smoothly,' she told a party functionary while admitting that Kesri would not have vacated the seat voluntarily.

As soon as the CWC meeting was over, she called on Kesri, describing him as a 'great leader'. Kesri was once again in a dilemma. 'It was gracious of her to have visited me when friends and colleagues deserted me. However, I failed to communicate the sense of betrayal. I was her host and she was my guest,' he said. Sonia also announced that Kesri's team of office-bearers would remain unchanged.

Kesri died as a disturbed and disillusioned man. He could not reconcile himself to his unceremonious ouster. Left without friends, in his last days, Kesri tried to jump onto Mamata Banerjee's bandwagon, but the Trinamul chief had little to offer. Disappointed, Kesri began lauding Feroze Varun, Sanjay and Menaka's son, as a potential challenger to Sonia and Priyanka, but before he could mobilize support for the young Gandhi, he fell in the bathroom. The seemingly small injury led to complications, for which he had to be hospitalized. There was much that he wanted to say, but he suffered an asthma attack and then slid into coma. In the public eye, he died as a loyalist, carrying his secrets with him.

SONIA THE LEADER

Sonia's stint as Congress president has seen her weather many highs and lows. After a flying start came massive disappointment, but by 2002 the AICC chief stabilized her position proving her critics wrong that her only claim to fame was the Gandhi surname. Just as things were looking up for the so-called Prime Minister in waiting, the outcome of the Gujarat assembly polls posed a big question mark over her future. The return of aggressive Hindustan at the centre stage of Indian polity made her look vulnerable.
Regardless of electoral prospects, however, opponents and well-wishers alike agree that Sonia has introduced a new style of functioning in her party. Though not a reformist, she succeeded in bringing about some change. Slowly, behind the scenes, she changed the Congress work culture. The old style Congressman adjusted, sometimes clumsily, to a more corporate style of operation and tried to be gender-sensitive and relatively clean in the party's fiscal matters.

While Sonia missed no opportunity in projecting herself along the lines of her role models Indira and Rajiv, her own distinct style emerged. She introduced what Jairam Ramesh called Japanese style of decision-making based on three steps—consulting the maximum number of persons, formulating a policy and then carrying the party along.

Her growing confidence, however, caught many leaders off guard. West Bengal's once powerful leader A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury became her first victim. Months before the 2000 assembly polls in Bengal, Chowdhury holding charge of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPPC) unit, raised the bogey of a mahajot (grand alliance) with rebel Congress leader Mamata Banerjee, who had joined hands with the BJP at the Centre to defeat the ruling Left alliance in Bengal. Sonia was reluctant to join hands with Mamata, but Chowdhury led a relentless campaign, almost raising a revolt against Sonia.

Closer to the assembly polls, he became lukewarm to the idea of mahajot as Mamata demanded bulk of assembly seats. Sonia, keen to create fissures in the BJP-led coalitions, extended a hand of friendship to Mamata's Trinamul Congress. Chowdhury panicked. He rushed to Sonia to wax on the virtues of going it alone. Sonia heard him out. In her lap was a red folder. As Chowdhury finished speaking and gulped a noisy sip of tea, Sonia said, 'But Barkatda, a few weeks before you were saying something different. I have all your statements, press clippings and
papers in this folder. They say that without Mamata, the Congress would draw a big zero in Bengal.’ The old man shuffled uncomfortably. There was silence till Chowdhury sought permission to leave. The moment Chowdhury was out of her living room, he hissed, ‘Tini netri hoye gechhen! (She has become a leader)’.

The Bengal election results were a disappointment for Sonia. The mahajot experiment failed miserably and Chowdhury tendered his resignation as WBPCC chief. The division between the Congress and the breakaway Trinamul Congress at the grass-roots level was so intense that it precluded any alliance. Sonia addressed the problem. She was convinced that senior party leader Pranab Mukherjee was responsible for events leading to Mamata’s exit from the par which destroyed the West Bengal Congress. Pranab was summoned and given the task of reviving the post-polls party network in Bengal.

The Bengali bhadralok was taken aback. The former economics professor was well tuned to Delhi and happy as the party’s chief whip in Rajya Sabha. But the orders were final. ‘You are going to Bengal as you know so much about state politics,’ Sonia told him, perhaps with some irony. From day one, a reluctant Pranab sought to quit the job.

In a year and a half, he met Sonia six times with an identical request—give the charge to someone else so that he could focus more on parliamentary work. Sonia always smiled and said he was doing a wonderful job as a parliamentarian and equally so as WBPCC chief Pranab’s agony continued. Among other things, the WBPCC had few resources and the annual expense on running state and district Congress committees alone exceeded Rs 15 lakh.

After Chowdhury and Pranab, Ghulam Nabi Azad became her next victim. Azad’s downfall came close on the heels of the party’s electoral successes in
Uttaranchal, Punjab and Manipur assembly polls in February 2002 and coincided with its landslide victory in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Much to the astonishment of party veterans, Sonia started cracking the whip. In a rare show of authority, she transferred Azad, who was the AICC general secretary, to Jammu and Kashmir as Pradesh Congress Committee (JKPCC) president.

Azad hated the new assignment till the party emerged as a major player in the J & K assembly polls in October 2002, with Azad in the running as chief ministerial nominee. In March 2002 he had fought against going there, refusing to take charge of the JKPCC office in Srinagar citing security and health reasons. The kingmaker of J & K could not reconcile to the idea that he would be asked to do the job of a PCC chief. After all, since the 1970s, the rootless wonder had held several important government and organizational posts in the Delhi durbar.

Sonia, however, was determined to send Azad to Srinagar and with good reason. For years Azad had an iron grip over the JKPCC. Sitting in Delhi, he would interfere even in appointments of district Congress units by operating through his trusted man, Peerzaadam Mohammed Sayeed. Successive PCC chiefs, AICC general secretaries and state party leaders had resented Azad’s rule by proxy. When Azad finally called on her murmuring that his wife, Shamim, was worried about his security Sonia said, ‘You have so much interest in J & K Congress, so you might as well run it. Our party workers and leaders in the state are braving militancy. We will speak to the Prime Minister to take up the issue of security.’ The matter was closed.

Azad’s abrupt shifting indicated a growing confidence in her leadership qualities. Moreover, it was a political message to the people of J & K that the Congress was taking the state assembly polls seriously. But Congressmen were unsure. After all, the PCC office at Srinagar had remained shut for many years. Azad’s
predecessor, Mohammad Shafi Qureshi, had, in fact, resigned when he was asked to stay in Srinagar.

But once Sonia’s gamble in the state paid off, Azad changed his view. At a CWC meeting soon after the party emerged as the second largest in the polls, Azad said, ‘Soniaji had the farsightedness which obviously, I lacked. She is the leader, she is a visionary, we are lesser mortals and I have no shame in admitting it’. Azad’s adulation set the tone for the rest of the CWC meeting when Arjun Singh, R.K Dhawan, Mohsina Kidwai and Ambika Soni credited Sonia with achieving what Narasimha Rao had failed-winning back the confidence of the majority community (namely Hindus) in the region, where the party trounced the BJP. They collectively said there was no reason why the verdict could not be repeated elsewhere in the country. Natwar Singh chipped in saying what the Congressmen needed to do was to blindly follow ‘Madam’.

The government-formation process in J & K also saw Sonia show her political wisdom. At a hurriedly convened CWC meeting on October 2002, Sonia made it clear that in her scheme of things, there was no inevitability of a Congress-led government as the AICC chief had an open mind on the choice of the new chief minister given the larger issues involved in the troubled state.

The initial euphoria to increase the Congress tally from fourteen to fifteen party-ruled states evaporated. Sonia’s ‘statesman-like’ approach baffled some CWC members while it surprised many in the Vajpayee regime.

Sources close to Sonia claimed that she did not have much difficulty in arriving at a decision. True to her preference for the Japanese style of decision-making, she first sought the views of her close associates. The CWC members then made up their mind in favour of People’s Democratic Party (PDP) leader Mufti
Mohammed Sayeed, and the decision was carried with ease. Of course, Sayeed’s argument that a chief minister of J&K hailing from the Muslim-majority valley would be better equipped to deal with separatists convinced her to opt for him.

During Mufti’s forty-five-minute meeting with Sonia, the country’s former internal security minister made a strong case for representation from the Valley. Sayeed told Sonia that the Kashmiri people had great expectations after voting out the National Conference. He underlined the primacy of the Valley in finding a peaceful solution to the situation in Kashmir. Sayeed kept recalling his long association with Indira and Rajiv and how the two leaders had a dream of putting an end to violence. Sayeed said that at his advanced stage of life, he wished to contribute something for lasting peace.13

Sonia smiled occasionally, and while Sayeed went on enlisting the Congress’s secular credentials and contribution in J & K, she could not help asking him why he left the parent organization if it was so good. A sheepish Sayeed quickly attributed his move to a communication gap and admitted own naivety in leaving the Congress four years ago. The canny politician sought to regain some ground, saying that in politics nothing was certain, thereby hinting at the possibility of the return of PDP to the Congress in future. Sonia, having scored the point, said, ‘Let us talk about present rather than the past or the future.’

The confidence gained by Sonia following the string of electoral successes had manifested itself at the time of nomination of party candidates for the Rajya Sabha elections. She sidelined powerful regional satraps and chief ministers such as Dig Vijay Singh, S.M. Krishna, Tarun Gogoi, Ajit Jogi and Vilasrao Deshmukh in her choice of candidates from their states but made them accept her nominees.
Sonia’s confidence was on display too in the way she attacked Prime Minister Vajpayee during the debate on the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) in the joint session of Parliament on 26 March 2002. She was a picture of confidence. Her speech was strong enough to provoke Vajpayee into making an unusual intervention, turning the entire debate into a Sonia vs. Vajpayee battle. She began by describing the legislation as an ‘instrument of suppression’ which Azad’s abrupt shifting indicated a growing confidence in her leadership qualities. Moreover, it was a political message to the people of J&K that the Congress was taking the state assembly polls seriously. But Congressmen were unsure. After all, the PCC office at Srinagar had remained shut for many years. Azad’s predecessor, Mohammad Shafi Qureshi, had, in fact, resigned when he was asked to stay in Srinagar.

Sonia cited examples of how the government could misuse the legislation. In this context she cited the way in which the Gujarat government used its provisions selectively against minorities. She reminded the Prime Minister of his duty to ‘protect the welfare of the people of India’ and wanted to know whether he ‘will be submissive and succumb to the internal pressure of his party and its sister organizations’. She concluded her speech with a warning to the Prime Minister: ‘Your moment of reckoning has come.’

The speech stung Vajpayee. In his response, he dealt solely with the Congress chief’s speech, leaving out the topic of the debate. The gloves were off. Vajpayee launched a frontal attack, saying that she had no right to remind him that his moment of reckoning had come or to talk about the internal politics of his party or the Sangh Parivar.

For political observers, Sonia’s speech stood out against that of the Prime Minister. Hers was a passionate appeal to Vajpayee not to let political considerations bring into existence a draconian piece of legislation that had the potential to violate
basic human rights, especially at a time when the polity was divided owing to the Gujarat communal riots and the Ayodhya agitation. In contrast, the Prime Minister's speech lacked substance. It was a personal attack and had a laudatory tone about his own long stint in Parliament, which did not go down well with many seasoned parliamentarians like Chandra Shekhar, Somnath Chatterjee and Jaipal Reddy.¹⁴

Sonia's leadership qualities, her confidence and practice of allowing all shades of opinions to have a say worked well in intra party affairs where Congressmen were used to the imperious conduct of Indira. Critics of her style remain. BJP's Arun Jaitley said, 'You cannot have her as a Prime Minister whose comprehension and understanding is constantly under doubt.'¹⁵ Some of the leaders ideologically closer to the Congress too found fault with Sonia's reliance on prepared text. Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav and Janata Dal ideologue Surendra Mohan questioned her competence, wondering why she seldom spoke in all-party meetings convened on important issues. Mohan said, 'It is strange that she constantly writes to the Prime Minister on policy matters but seldom speaks at all-party meets.'¹⁶

But there was one uniform admission. The Sonia of 2002 was remarkably different from that of 1998. In 1998 many may have viewed Sonia as a supreme saviour - a person who saved the Congress from certain death under the clumsy leadership of Sitaram Kesri but outside the Congress, she was almost written off as a housewife whose only claim to fame was her Gandhi connection.

By 2000, the fence-sitters gathered again planning to organize another coup.. A meeting was arranged. Prasada told the ambitious Rajesh Pilot to lead from the front. Maratha leader Sharad Pawar, now out of the Congress, signaled a go-ahead. Karunakaran assured support from the south. At least five members of the CWC promised to come out at the right time, and former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's
name was once again invoked. Though he never formally pledged support to this group of power seekers, his blessings were taken for granted.

Several rounds of lunch and dinner followed, but somehow the game plan was never finalized. The old debate over who should take over after Sonia was shunted out came as the biggest obstacle. Some were in favour of a tried-and-tested Rao, while Pilot made it clear that he alone would lead the anti-Sonia front. Prasada offered a compromise. He suggested a collective leadership, saying Sonia should first be challenged in the organizational polls. He said that Pilot should contest Sonia while declaring himself as a standby candidate. A legal expert who was present in one such meeting declared himself as a challenger to Sonia, saying that if nobody came forward, he would contest. Prasada was not amused and told the first-time Rajya Sabha MP not to be in a hurry. Arrebhai, you are not in some bar council where you can score some brownie points in contesting against Ram Jethmalani," he said.  

The Sonia camp got wind of the discussions. She quickly summoned her loyal supporters. Natwar Singh volunteered to go to the other camp. However, the career diplomat was not taken seriously by Prasada who told Natwar 'Kya milnejulne mein koi pabandi hai? Aap log to har jagah conspiracy dekhte ham. (Is there a bar on meeting among ourselves? You people keep seeing a conspiracy angle in everything).' Natwar reported the response to Sonia. 

Three more leaders were pressed into action. Digvijay Singh met Prasada with the ostensible purpose of discussing that all was not well in the party. Ahmad Patel offered his services and R.K. Dhawan too joined in, though nobody specifically asked him to do so.
Patel was viewed with suspicion, but he convinced Prasada that he was not happy with the state of affairs in the party. Dhawan restored the channel of communication with those claiming to be loyal to Narasimha Rao. Sonia started getting constant feedback. She was alarmed to note that the dissent was much deeper than she had realized. She decided to meet the disgruntled party leaders to tide over the leadership challenge.

With both sides bracing for a showdown, a tragedy occurred that summarily altered the course of the intraparty feud. This was the death of Rajesh Pilot. With it, the dissident activities died down. Prasada tried hard to replace Pilot, but he lacked credibility and a mass base.

Sonia's record as a leader is one laced with failures and success. She may have done exceedingly well in some areas, but lack of perspective and a killer instinct continue to be her biggest drawbacks. Take for example the Tehelka exposé into murky defense deals that had all the ingredients to topple the Vajpayee regime. As with the Bofors scandal, the sensitive and often emotive issue of national security was interlinked with Tehelka.

But the way she and her party handled the Tehelka case, it became a classic case of one step forward and two steps backwards. The party was upbeat at Bangalore where the eighty-first session of the AICC was held against the backdrop of the Tehelka revelations and the Opposition outcry in Parliament. There was also great demand for the resignation of the Vajpayee-led NDA government. The Congress had finally positioned critically and ideologically in such a way with other position parties including the Left. But did all this add up to a strategic perspective? Sonia gave a clarion call to 'liberate the country from the shackles of the shameful, corrupt and communal NDA government' and promised to restore to the party its past glory.
But once back in Delhi, the lack of perspective became evident when the much-touted action plan for an agitation against the government had only the Congress as the main player and excluded the other Opposition parties. The Left, Samajwadi Party and other non-NDA parties were upset and wondered why they were left out if the plan was intended to achieve the immediate objective of liberating the country from NDA rule. The Congress could have given a greater impetus to the plan had it been more broad-based, they argued. Sonia could have opted for a joint Opposition movement. The interests of real politic would have been served better that way. In any case, the Congress plan set too much hope on events unfolding to its benefit and its ability to launch a mass agitation. The net result was that the action plan never really took off among the masses.

A senior Congress leader said what the Tehelka action plan showed was that the dominant sections of the party leadership, including Sonia, did not have a real understanding of how to go about forging a coalition at the national level. Paradoxically, the need for this sort of arrangement, as opposed to the Congress’s own theory of one-party rule, was acknowledged at the Bangalore plenary.

But the big blow came from Gujarat. It was a sunny afternoon in New Delhi on 15 December 2002 when Sonia began to read a note summing up the state election results. As her eyes moved down the page, the worry lines on her forehead deepened. The paper in front of her, submitted by Congress general secretary in charge of Gujarat Kamal Nath, read as follows:

The Congress did not win a single seat within a 100-km radius of Godhra, where a coach of the Sabarmati Express was set ablaze on 27 February, killing 58.
Out of 65 seats that fell in areas affected by the riots, the BJP won 53. At Sayajigunj in the heart of Vadodara, the Congress had won the assembly by-election on 24 February by over 20,000 votes. It lost by over 90,000 votes.

The message from Nath’s note on the Gujarat results thus went beyond the boundaries of the state. If ‘Modernization’ spread to neighbouring Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, Sonia had no recipe to tackle it. The Congress president telephoned party chief ministers, asking them to be more vigilant. We have a challenge before us,’ she said.

For Sonia’s managers, the biggest problem was how to prevent the Gujarat-model from being replicated in poll-bound states mostly ruled by the Congress. In terms of numbers in the Lok Sabha, the Congress has a daunting task, as it is a spent force in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

Indicating the post-Gujarat mood that prevailed in the party a senior CWC member said: ‘The trouble is that we know what the problem is, but we do not know the solution.’

For Congressmen, Gujarat posed a bigger question: whether their Prime Minister-in-waiting will make it in Delhi in the near future. At the party headquarters, the unanimous view was that after the Gujarat verdict, politics would not be the same in the country. Some of Sonia’s managers fear that if Hindutva forces gain currency at the national level, party men could start viewing her as a liability. The favourable verdicts of fourteen states suddenly started looking insignificant and once again, Sonia began to look vulnerable.

Soon the knives were out in the Congress over the party’s strategy to focus blatantly on majority votes during the assembly polls. While it posed no threat to Sonia’s leadership or her unassailable position within the party, under attack was the
troika of Young Turks-Kamal Nath, Ambika Soni and Ahmad Patel—who were key members in formulating the Gujarat strategy.

Soon after the Gujarat polls, CWC members advised Sonia to pick up the threads from Panchmarhi, where she had promised to restore the party’s lost glory and make the Congress a party of the best and brightest. Some suggested that the party should try to get back breakaway factions like Sharad Pawar’s Nationalist Congress Party and Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamul Congress on the lines of the merger of Tamil Maanila Congress in Tamil Nadu.

Others said the Congress would be able to derive advantage from the return of these breakaway factions only if it showed the capability to propel both itself and its newfound allies to power in the states as well as in the Centre. As a senior CWC member pointed out, ultimately all the questions boiled down to gaining power, which alone would fulfill the larger objective of regaining past glory.

Soon after the Gujarat elections, assembly polls were held in Himachal Pradesh. The BJP, buoyed by the Gujarat results, brought in Hindutva hardliner Narendra Modi for campaigning, but anti-incumbency and deep factionalism proved fatal for the ruling BJP. The Himachal victory somewhat restored Sonia’s confidence.

After all, Himachal had more than 96 per cent of Hindu population and if it could not be swayed by Modi’s rhetoric, there was still hope for the Sonia-led Congress.

Sonia decided to go on the offensive. She summoned a meeting of the Congress chief ministers at Srinagar where no national leader had dared to hold a political conclave in nearly two decades. The Srinagar meet was a roaring success in terms of Sonia’s public image even as the Vajpayee regime privately lamented it.
saying it stretched the security arrangements in the troubled state. The message from Srinagar was clear—the Congress under Sonia has a pan-Indian identity.

A month later, the Congress president sought to assert her leadership once again, convening a brain-storming session of the party think tank at Shimla. As Sonia sat through protracted debates on the need for coalition, sipping jasmine tea, the think tank made two critical formulations—the Congress is ready for a broad-based secular alliance, a rainbow coalition of ‘like-mined parties’. The second part of the formulation was a personal triumph for Sonia. It said as and when such a coalition becomes operational, Sonia would head it.

The Shimla resolve made waves discomforting her political opponents like Sharad Pawar and Mulayam Singh Yada Political exigencies in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh were such that these mercurial regional satraps were desperately seeking Congress support. Pawar and Mulayam began to look for cover, saying it was premature to discuss the leadership issue. Pawar said it was not necessary that the biggest group should head such a coalition. Mulayam went a step further saying Sonia’s foreign origin was no longer an issue. For the first time, Sonia tried to clear some doubts surrounding.

Her leadership in her presidential address, Sonia told party delegates that as party chief she independently takes all crucial decisions. The remark was unusual from a reticent person like Sonia but her close advisers said she decided to go public to scotch gossip that she was guided by a coterie.

Thus, the effort to attain power at the Centre was indeed a test of Sonia’s leadership qualities. Her actions in the last few years have shown that despite having the support of the rank and file, she has been overly cautious with regard to the many groups in the party.

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Political commentators like Kanti Bajpai and Mahesh Rangarajan are convinced that Sonia is here to stay. Recalling his interactions on foreign policy issues with Sonia, Bajpai said, ‘She seems prepared to listen to all sorts of voices,’ adding that earlier she gave away little. But by 2002, her body language showed quickness of response and a candidness in stating her own views even if it meant disagreeing with you. Rangarajan said that Sonia’s biggest problem was that she was a general of a shrunken army that had to battle on many fronts before hoping to win the war. Giving some concrete examples, Rangarajan said, ‘It remains to be seen how she wins over the great Indian middle class without alienating the poorer sections of society. How will she win back Dalits and farmers who have moved away from the Congress?’

Others are not so assured of her future success. Another noted political commentator, Saeed Naqvi, is unsure about Sonia’s ability to reach 7 Race Course Road. We really do not know what she stands for. All we know is secrecy and a coterie,‘ he lamented. Sociologist Dipankar Gupta said Sonia’s problem was that she was neither a run-of-the-mill net nor a visionary. Yet he thinks that if she succeeds in bringing all the secular forces on one side, she can surmount her opponents. Certainly her victory in many state polls and the enthusiasm she has generated in the Congress ranks offer her an opportunity to consolidate her position in the party and move towards 7 Race Course Road.

Even as the debate about Sonia Gandhi’s leadership skills and inexperience continued, she sprang a surprise that turned out to be a major personal triumph for her. Two days after attending a ‘unity conclave’ of opposition parties at CPM MP Somnath Chatterjee’s residence where she relished hilsa fish, Sonia decided to move a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.
The motion moved on 18 August 2003 indicted the Vajpayee regime on several counts ranging from corruption to anarchy. It was predictably defeated, given the Opposition strength in Parliament. What it did succeed in doing, however, was to pitch her as an alternative leader to Vajpayee. Here was the leader of the Opposition leading from the front, mixing aggression with wit, no longer the first-time MP who struggled with words as she took the oath as member of Parliament. The message was clear: any future collaboration with other non-NDA partners would have to be under her leadership.
REFERENCES

1. These observations were made in the author’s presence.

2. These remarks were made by Kesri days before his death when he called the author for a chat.

3. Vadakan later rose to become Secretary of the AICC’s media department.

4. Inputs given by persons extremely close to Sonia.

5. Sonia’s speeches at Bangalore on 12 and 21 January 1998 in Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

6. Narrated by a person who was on the flight.

7. CWC resolution adopted on 5 March 1998.

8. Kesri made these observations in the presence of the author.


10. Told to the author by Senior Congress Leaders from Bengal.

11. Azad made the remark in the CWC meeting held in November 2002.

12. Natwar made the remark in the CWC meeting.

13. Highly placed sources close to Sonia and Mufti gave these inputs to the author.


16. As told to the author.

17. While interacting with media, Prasad later made fun of that MP without naming him.

18. As told to the author by Prasada.


20. Kamal Nath’s note to the Congress chief submitted on 16 December after the party’s defeat in assembly polls.

21. A senior party leader and CWC member made the remark to the author.


23. Mahesh Rangarajan in the Times of India (17 November 2002).