

Sanjay: The Man And The Myth

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WHEN Sanjay Gandhi died a year ago, a newspaper (not this one) wrote: "It (death) has removed from Indian politics the most forceful personality it has known since independence." Forceful as Sanjay was, he was also the most controversial. In his premature death, he cheated both his friends and foes—friends were cheated of hopes they had from him and foes were deprived of a worthwhile object of their passionate attacks. And he remains controversial even after death. After all, journalistic reputations and political careers have been built on pro and anti-Sanjay postures. Not surprisingly, his friends remain just as adoring as his foes remain malicious. Yet the process of historical evaluation must start one day and the first anniversary of his death seems as good a time as any to begin the exercise.

Sanjay cannot be understood except in terms of the Congress system and its political culture; he was its thesis, became its anti-thesis and was on the way to becoming its synthesis.

His political odyssey began strictly within the milieu of the Congress culture; he represented its thesis, in three ways. First, he was an unsolicited target for those who had made a profession out of attacking the Nehru family—those who chose not to compromise with the Congress system, and who in order to attack the system had to attack Nehru and his family. So, the Lohias, the Raj Narains, the Mani Ram Bagris first vilified Indira Gandhi to spite the father and later, when she became the Prime Minister, made the son the target of their malice. Because their politics derived sustenance from a pathological hatred of the Nehrus, Sanjay could not really be spared the burden of their animus; equally inevitably, Mrs Gandhi could not ignore their persistent attacks without incurring serious political damage. And, thus began Sanjay's induction into the Indian politics under his mother's "protection".

Unwilling Entry

Second, his desire to manufacture a car and the subsequent allegations of exploiting his family connection were not at all incongruent with the Congress culture. Since independence, various segments of our elite—administrative, economic and intellectual—have promoted without qualm or doubt, careers of their scions; indeed most persons in positions of authority or influence owe their place to their parentage. And perhaps only by being so piously disapproving of Sanjay's "exploitation" of his mother's name, could our elite find a release for their guilt complex.

Thirdly, Sanjay entered the political arena, albeit unwillingly, only to defend the Congress system which had come, in 1975, under its most severe challenge in JP's total revolution. C. S. Pandit, an observer sympathetic to the JP movement, opines: "It was not just Indira that was to be removed this time, but a whole system that had got corroded from inside because of a single party having enjoyed

power too long." By rushing to the defence of his mother, Sanjay was in essence defending the Congress system.

And in that process, he became the system's anti-thesis. He came to understand, as no one before him had done, the extent of its hollowness. He realised that the Chavans, the Bahugunas, the Tripathis had no independent sources of power like ideology, popularity, organisational talent or charisma, but were, instead, hopelessly dependent upon the system. In that very realisation lay Sanjay's strength. His political instincts told him that the Congress "leaders" really had no clothes. And once having denuded them of their mystique, it was easy for Sanjay to appropriate the right to speak in the name of the Congress system. His style moved him into the anti-thesis phase, in two ways: he was anti-bureaucracy and anti-consensus.

Paralysing Effect

He was, first, anti-bureaucracy. He did not share the earlier generation's awe of the ICS (and its step-child, the IAS), long romanticised as the finest human machine God ever invented. Instead, he understood that the civil servants were a willing party—abetting and enjoying—to the corruption of the Congress system. He could not, therefore, concede that the civil servants somehow always knew what was best for public interest.

He was anti-consensus because in the Congress system, consensus had become synonymous with status quo and was used to checkmate changes. Compromise at any cost had become its byword. Consensus enjoined a politics of accommodation which inevitably became politics of sterility. New ideas and new blood had to reconcile to those already entrenched. He realised the paralysing effects of consensus and abandoned it with alacrity.

In the process of becoming the system's anti-thesis, he acquired the trappings of charisma: A die-hard following; a cause, however, undefined; and, an opposition, determined and vindictive. In sharp contrast to the tired, trite and bland men masquerading as leaders, Sanjay talked of change, insisted on action, conveyed a sense of urgency, and demanded earnestness.

In the last analysis, the rapturous response he got from his young (and not-so-young) followers materialised only because he ministered to their most pressing need—the need to believe in the real possibility of escape from an oppressive Congress system that put a premium on age, seniority, and senility. They followed him willingly because he preached a gospel of change and mobility. The Janata Party's prosecution and persecution only enhanced his standing with his devotees. And, after the 1980 elections, there was a certain degree of inevitability about him. Eventually he acquired the hallmark of charismatic leaders—the grudging respect and awe of political opponents.

While in purgatory, Sanjay had begun to work towards a synthesis of his thesis and anti-

thesis strands. On the one hand, he assiduously propagated an ideology—the doctrine of anti-ideology. He made pragmatism fashionable. He shied away from doctrinaire slogans and solutions. At the same time, in an age of shifting loyalties, he made loyalty the supreme virtue. He also acquired an appreciation of the imperative to win popular acceptance and support for governmental programmes, though he remained skeptical that a free press could play a crucial role in winning such acceptance. Instead, he continued to regard most newsmen as "urban nuisance".

It is against such an analysis of Sanjay Gandhi, that two of the most damning charges against him must be examined—charges of extra-constitutional authority and Family Planning "excesses" during the Emergency.

There are three aspects to the first charge. First, the proponents of strict democratic norms resent all those who exercise political power without popular mandate. The contention is noble and acceptable in its entirety. Yet it has not always been possible to deny power and influence to those close to an elected leader. Just take the case of Roslyn Carter. She had no elective office, yet she attended cabinet meetings, received security briefings, and indulged in wheeling and dealing on behalf of her husband's political interests. In the US News and World Report's 1980-Who Rules America survey, she was named the fifth most powerful person in the United States.

Secondly, sensitive souls were aghast at the senseless genuflecting and adulation accorded to Sanjay by Congressmen. More than bemoan the shameless spectacles of entire state cabinets lining up at airports to receive Sanjay, most of us were embarrassed that Sanjay brought to the fore our built-in feudalism. The modern in us revolted at such servility.

Close Advisers

The third objectionable aspect of the extra-constitutional authority charge pertains to the kind of people that gathered around Sanjay. It must, though, be remembered that it is the nature of political power to attract hangers-on. Mrs Gandhi has always had a group of close advisers. Once there were Gajrals, Chandra Shekhars, Dinesh Singh and Romesh Thapars; they were replaced by Kauls, Haksars, Dhars, and Kumar-manglams; who were followed by Rays, Rajini Patels and Barooahs. The objection about Sanjay's advisers—Tytlers, Arjun Dasses, Kamalnaths and Bansil Lals—essentially emanated from an elitist perspective. Unlike the earlier crowd at the Prime Minister's house, Sanjay's men were neither polished nor elegant. Yet it must be most emphatically pointed out that both Bansil Lals and Dinesh Singhs operated within the same State system; the earlier crowd was certainly full of "the graces of civilised existence" but was quite capable of unleashing "medieval savagery" when it dealt with political dissenters.

What about the "atrocities" of Family Planning? Excesses there were, as both Mrs Gandhi and Sanjay later conceded. Yet posterity would give Sanjay high marks for having the political guts to place for the first time the problem of population control at the top of our national agenda.

We can all recall the international ridicule of the mid-1960 about our inability to do anything about the population explosion. The term "Soft State" was coined for India. Perhaps it is relevant to recall that during Mrs Gandhi's 1966 visit to Washington, John D. Rockefeller tried to impress upon her the urgent need to plunge into family planning. When the new Prime Minister pointed out political risks involved, Rockefeller was so incensed that he wrote a letter to Dean Rusk, then Secretary of State and a former head of Rockefeller Foundation, suggesting that the United States should use the leverage of its aid to seek a more forceful replacement for the vacillating prime minister; the alternative suggested was Morarji Desai!

Incredible Rumours

The extent of "excesses" of the Family Planning is debatable; total women of the Press merely gazed to the most incredible brutality these run-ed jarred our perceptions of a peace-sive community; for ver forgave Sanjay less, if there were the explanation must sociologists rather political analysts.

History must judge on Sanjay's time to come. His generation overwhelmed his strategic vision. Of course, he was not the first Indian politician to practise realpolitik, he was first not to pretend otherwise. But capturing, winning and holding on to power was much different—and much easier—than using that power to implement a well-thought-out and ordered set of political priorities. Beyond a certain limit, social and economic forces are not entirely amenable to politics of pragmatism. For example, he and his followers were entitled to insist on a "development-oriented bureaucracy" but they never spelled out the contents of "development". Nor did Sanjay purge the party of its "the worst, sick and diseased part". He merely amputated one cancerous limb here and one there, but the sickness was and is of the whole system.

That his politics of pragmatism had its own limitations became abundantly clear after his death. The Sanjay generation disappeared overnight; the lemmings switched their loyalties, hopes and self-interest to Rajiv. The capital walls today are plastered with posters celebrating Rajiv's triumph at Amethi; ironically these posters are issued in the name of those very people who are organising Sanjay's first death anniversary. Had Sanjay lived longer, he would have ensured a more lasting legacy and following.