**[Congress, the cat in the adage](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690097/congress-the-cat-in-the-adage)**

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SHAKESPEARE offered this phrase for the cat in the adage that wanted the fish but was scared of wetting the paws: “Letting I dare not wait upon I would.” That’s what political opponents of Narendra Modi in India do. It’s pretty much the quandary of Bilawal Bhutto or Rahul Gandhi. They are the cat that wants power but is wary of harnessing it to a grand purpose their countries deserve, something Hindutva flaunts with studied ease in India. Reason why Hindu rashtra looks nigh, and the Gandhian-Nehruvian vision stands decimated.

For all the insults flung at it, Congress remains the only political party that has a footprint etched in every nook and cranny of the country, from far north to deep south, from the east to the west of the country. Its all-round presence is unlikely to be matched by the BJP or any other party. In a sense, the party should be offering the truest if not always a flattering reflection of the country.

It did so up to 1991. Then there was a Faustian bargain. It exchanged its Nehruvian vision of equity for an imported model of a society whose blueprint is kept in the strongroom of the IMF. The plans, usually kept secret from the public, are not different to those being offered to Sri Lanka and Pakistan today. Good luck to both. India was there faster and look what the [WHO is saying](https://www.dawn.com/news/1688230) of its inability to save millions of lives in the pandemic, or what human rights bodies are saying about its growing inequities and concomitant alienation of the people across its geography.

**Read:** [*US monitoring rise in rights abuses in India, says Blinken*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1684765)

Congress was back to soul-searching again at a conclave last week, this time in Rajasthan, the rare state where it’s still holding on to power. Only recently — in October 2018 — the party called for a second independence movement. It would have been a singularly inspirational step, which, sadly, turned out to be a non-starter.

In May 2019, Prime Minister [Modi was returned](https://www.dawn.com/news/1484249) with a greater majority. In the interregnum, did anyone from the Congress party come close to what its leaders did in their first freedom struggle? They went to jail, usually for years, where they cogitated, wrote books and plotted the future. Leave alone jail, did Congress call out the people to take to the streets, leave their jobs and colleges and work to save the country? The freedom movement was all about that.

Instead, what we saw was intense haggling over seats with other opposition parties — seats that Congress would lose. And then the party was reportedly consulting some genius with an alleged magic wand to help them win elections. If winning elections is the issue, why bother with a mass movement? How will the promise in Jodhpur be different from its previously unfulfilled one? Little can be gleaned without recourse to history.

The Hindu-Muslim issue is a challenge but not an insurmountable one.

It was Gandhiji who turned the party into a mass movement against British rule. Else, for Alan Octavian Hume, its founder in 1885, the party was a forum for the Indian elite, an invention to pre-empt another boiler blowing up with pent-up anger against foreign rule, to abort another 1857. Post-independence, Congress helped assemble an impressive liberal and democratic constitution under the guidance of Nehru and Ambedkar. However, Congress remained essentially regressive in its societal core.

Gandhi had problems with the socially equitable Dalit vision of Ambedkar and that hasn’t changed very much outside the statute books. In other ways also, the party hasn’t confronted its innate fear of being linked with social change: the cat in the adage. Its senior leaders threw a fit when the British government — on advice from Hindu reformists — increased the nuptial age of young brides by two years from 10 years to 12. Hindu dharma was in danger, they proclaimed, never mind that a 10-year-old girl had just died from marital rape. Child marriage is flourishing after seven decades of independence. Regressive practices cut across most Indian communities and religious groups, particularly with regard to gender equities that are abhorred but not quelled. Why?

**Read:** [*Congress in crisis*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1592818)

There can be several explanations, but it’s chiefly that regressive groups command crucial votes. It’s a societal problem, and it has festered unchecked. This is not to say that all leaders today support barbaric social practices. And it’s equally true that Congress has been calling for reservation of seats in parliament for women. However, it needs to admit honestly why that is not likely to happen anytime soon. Look. There are allies, important allies that oppose women’s reservations. There are allies that support Hindutva but not the BJP. If these are not the issues — the elephant in the room — for launching a second freedom struggle, what are?

The [Hindu-Muslim](https://www.dawn.com/news/1313831/segregation-of-hindus-and-muslims-in-india-very-strong-says-scholar) issue is a challenge but not an insurmountable one. Both communities wallow, or have been allowed to live in mistrust, while also embracing mediaeval social practices. There is a need to critique both without fear of losing elections. This has been the bane of India. Selfless and dedicated people fighting blind faith and superstition are shot dead. People who speak out for human rights are in jail.

On the larger picture, unlike Congress, which mobilised the masses under Gandhi’s watch, the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha were envisioned as mass movements, as fascism usually is. They may not have been very successful against Gandhi’s towering presence but they remained a determined and motivated lot.

Between Golwalkar or Vajpayee or Modi, their goal was never in any doubt. They tweaked their strategy in keeping with the political moment. We may scoff at their nonsensical sociology and terrible historiography, or their double distilled hatred of India’s cultural and religious diversity, but one thing is clear. The RSS, not Congress, gained oxygen from the 1991 neoliberal churning. Hindutva got the fish, and Congress is wondering how.

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