

# All The GOP Thinking For The Delhi Durbar

## Congress didn't present a clear vision, and again failed to admit the obvious in Udaipur

**Rahul Verma**



If you are a Congress sympathiser, you would have read about Sonia Gandhi's inaugural speech at the party's three-day chintan shivir, which ended yesterday. She said an exceptional situation needs exceptional solutions. Depending on how you feel about the current leadership, you may have been enthused or disappointed at the changes proposed.

But the speech you should have listened to was by Sunil Jakhar, former Punjab PCC chief, who quit Congress on May 14, while the Udaipur meet was on. Jakhar's diagnosis of the party's exceptional situation was far better. His 40-minute speech, broadcast over Facebook, had more clarity and content on the nature of Congress's crisis than what was discussed at the chintan shivir.

Udaipur was mostly about challenges India faces, not about challenges Congress faces. The 430 invited delegates at the shivir were divided into groups to brainstorm on six issues – political, economic, organisational, social justice, youth and farmers. Of course, as the main opposition party, Congress must deliberate on national issues, and highlight failings of BJP governments. But that wasn't surely the main purpose.

Jakhar cited a Wasim Barelvi couplet that neatly summed up what this shivir missed – “Ghar ko sajane ka tasavur toh hai bahut, paheley yeh toh tai ho ghar ka bachae kaisey (There's so much desire to decorate the house, but first we have to decide how to save the house).”

Udaipur's deliberations would have been useful had the party managed to create a map of India's current ideological space and set medium-term goals. The least the party should have done is to present a vision document highlighting what Congress stands for and why Indians should rally behind it. Instead, the party

seemed to have concluded the shivir after making some piecemeal adjustments – restrictions on party nominating family members, term limit in Rajya Sabha nomination, reservation for marginalised groups in party's organisational structure, induction of young leaders etc.

Can these changes, even if they get implemented in letter and spirit, rejuvenate the party? No. Why then is Congress, to quote Jakhar again, behaving as if the na-



Still grandstanding

tion's responsibility lies on them at a time when it is facing an existential crisis?

The answer lies in, as I argued in a previous column for **TOI** (Grand Old Party & Its Grand Illusions, March 14), some deep-rooted belief in certain myths. In these myths, the party and Gandhi family fancy themselves as the sole saviour of the country, its democracy, its poor and religious minorities, and others.

These myths have been perpetuated by a close coterie of Gandhi family loyalists comprising not only Congress politicians, but also what could be called a “Delhi Durbar” made up of journalists, academics, civil servants, businessmen and civil society activists.

Membership of this durbar is not permanent – old members lose favour and move to the margin and make room for new entries. These myths are the key to the preservation of the Gandhi family at the top of the party hierarchy. It has created a feedback loop in which no big shake-up is possible. Announcements about changes in Congress's organisational set-up reflect the Delhi Durbar's interest in maintaining the status quo.

Political parties often fail and die due to organisational atrophy (such as splits) and leadership crisis, but they are most likely to die when they lose their *raison d'être*. Congress, it seems, does not see that the large part of the current crisis is internal and inter-linked – organisational atrophy, absence of credible leadership and an unclear ideological vision.

The most important failing of Congress is its inability to say what it stands for clearly. Why should re-imagining of an ideological programme take priority over other changes? Because a coherent vision both enables the process of organisation-building as well as helps in the emergence of a new leadership.

Only a clear ideological vision makes party cadres toil hard and inspires voters. Yes, it is difficult to define an ideological platform that appears credible and resonates with a substantial segment of the electorate. But mere rhetoric won't help, especially if the party is not in office.

Perhaps Prashant Kishor knew the fate of this shivir when he remarked while declining the offer to join the Empowered Action Group, “The party needs leadership and collective will to fix the deep-rooted structural problems through transformational reforms.”

A strong national opposition party is crucial. We need robust political competition. If Congress hopes to not lose that spot very soon, it must first stop grandstanding.

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