

Lord Meghnad Desai

# Out of My Mind: I.N.D.I.A. Alliance Needs An Innovative Strategy

The optimal way for the Congress would be to contest no Lok Sabha seat but insist its partners put its candidates up for the Rajya Sabha seats. That way there would be no internal rivalry and the Congress could be the responsible Big Brother

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The opening of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on 22 January must have thrilled the nation and the Indian diaspora. It was a much better thought-out project than the opponents of the BJP. It was a privately funded and organised event with prominent members of the public in attendance. There was no State financing except for providing security. The Prime Minister was there in his private capacity as a *Yajamaan* – host of the ceremony. So, you cannot say the principle of secularism was violated.

It will of course have a positive impact on the General Election. Narendra Modi is too astute a politician not to have thought it through as can be seen by his careful coverage of States in South India, visiting Rama temples to show that his choice of Ayodhya was inclusive. Care was taken to invite the tribals, the Dalits and other minority groups and given prominence.

The I.N.D.I.A. Alliance has a one-line program – defeating Modi. As on now, it does not look like it stands a chance. Even before Ayodhya, it was going to be difficult. Now, the challenge is to avert a landslide. The Alliance was caught wrong-footed as Modi must have expected, if not planned, and the timing & choreography of the event carefully. He has the knack for digging holes for the Opposition to fall in. And they duly did.

But let bygones be bygones. The Alliance must now concentrate on the upcoming Election. There are already rumblings in the air as it is not surprising. This Alliance is what the Americans call, “too many Chiefs and not enough Indians”. There are potentially half a dozen aspirant Prime Ministers in the group. Mamata Bannerji has already claimed she invented the acronym. Her fellow leaders, Nitish Kumar and Sharad Pawar, also candidates in the PM stakes. Uddhav Thackeray and Akhilesh Yadav carry the burden of their fathers’ ambition. Mallikarjun Kharge had been put forward and accepted as a point man, precisely because no one thinks he is a serious candidate.

Even so, the difficulty is with the Congress. The seat-sharing problem between the Congress and the rest could wreck the Alliance. Mamata Bannerji has already staked claim to all 42 seats in West Bengal for her TMC. The Congress had only 2 seats in West Bengal, hence, its case is quite weak. One of the two is Adhir Ranjan, but he can get a Rajya Sabha seat.

The solution for the seat-sharing problem of the Alliance however is implicit in what Mamata Banerji is proposing. As far as possible, the Congress must leave its powerful regional partners with all seats they wish. This should apply to Bihar-the JDU, Uttar Pradesh-the SP, Delhi & Punjab- the AAP, Maharashtra – the Uddhav Shiv Sena, and Tamil Nadu-the DMK. Indeed, the Congress should only contest where it is in power (Karnataka) or is the principal Opposition. It would be better if any two partners in the Alliance did not compete in the same state, let alone for the same seat..

The logic is simple. The Congress has a nationwide presence, but not nationwide support. It has not been able to win seats in the heartland of North India nor in West India. So, it should avoid spoiling the game of its partners, but just back them with support. The logic for this is clear from the resignation of Milind Deora. He wanted the South Mumbai seat, but he had lost it to Shiv Sena in 2019. There was no way he could have that seat back with Uddhav Shiv Sena as ally. They should have promised him a Rajya Sabha seat from Maharashtra in return for not contesting South Mumbai.

Indeed, the optimal way for the Congress would be to contest no Lok Sabha seat but insist its partners put its candidates up for the Rajya Sabha seats. That way there would be no internal rivalry and the Congress could be the responsible Big Brother. There is no barrier to Rahul Gandhi becoming the Prime Minister from the Rajya Sabha!

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