



THE HINDU CENTRE

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Interview

We will stand by every community, we will safeguard their interests: Ahmed Patel



SMITA GUPTA



Ahmed Patel - The Hindu

When Sonia Gandhi was Congress President, her political secretary, Ahmed Patel, was often referred to as the "second-most important person in the party". A quintessential backroom politician, Mr. Patel rose through the ranks in the Congress. He started with village- and taluka-level politics in Gujarat, came to Delhi for the first time in 1977, and was elected as a Lok Sabha MP in the first election post-Emergency. Thereafter, he worked with Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and Sonia Gandhi in different capacities in the Congress. Excerpts from an interview by Smita Gupta, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy:

India is a year away from the general election. Has the mood finally changed?

Yes, it seems so. In 2014, the BJP came to power solely by making tall promises, which were unrealistic. The reality is that they have failed to fulfil their promises. If we look at the situation today, we can say that the country has regressed since [former Prime Minister] Manmohan Singh gave up office in 2014. Be it economics or the social fabric or the agrarian issue, the situation has become much worse.

Look at the economic situation: the current deficit account is almost \$75 billion, net FDI has reduced from \$40 billion dollars to \$27 billion, the prices of petrol and diesel have skyrocketed, unemployment is at its peak. On the social side, there are atrocities against women where their own people are involved. Crimes are rising against Dalits, Adivasis, the economically backward, and minorities. They had promised heaven on earth — “Achhe din aayenge”. Where are those achhe din? People are saying that the UPA government days were better than this.

Indians are seeing the real ‘Gujarat model’, as we saw during Narendrabhai’s tenure as Chief Minister, when the Assembly was routinely bypassed. Now we see how Parliament too is being rendered almost irrelevant by the ruling party. It is shocking that the House can’t debate a no-confidence motion, which has maximum priority in rules of business. Those who fail to govern the country now want to win 2019 by dividing the country along caste and community.

What will the general election be fought on? Personality, ideology, or economics?

On ideology, the UPA’s achievements, and the misdeeds and failures of the BJP-led NDA government.

But don’t you think economics will be the key?

Ultimately, the question boils down to what will a poor man eat, can the youth find jobs, are farmers able to even recover the cost of farming. So, yes, it will be the common man’s economics.

So, ideology will not be such a big issue?

Of course it will be. The ruling party will try its best to divert the election agenda from these key issues. Their strategy is to divert and then divide through emotive issues.

The Information and Broadcasting Minister sought to take away accreditation from journalists ostensibly peddling fake news. But the Prime Minister overturned it. Indira Gandhi declared Emergency which placed restrictions on journalists; Rajiv Gandhi introduced the Defamation Bill.

Yes, the Prime Minister has done the right thing. But whether prior permission [for the attempt] was taken or not is still in the realm of speculation. Only time will tell the truth. There are ways and means of controlling fake news but you cannot immediately suspend the accreditation of journalists. The Emergency was eventually lifted and the Defamation Bill was withdrawn.

A key issue that the BJP used to oust the Congress from power was corruption. But under this government, we have seen corruption cases involving people allegedly associated with the government, whether Lalit Modi or Nirav Modi. Will the Congress make it an election issue?

Of course. As you have mentioned, there is no doubt that public perception about this government is that corruption is rampant. Look at how they have diluted the RTI [Right to Information Act]? There is a plan to reduce the salaries and rank of Information Commissioners. They have sat on the Lokpal [law] and have shown no seriousness on the Whistle Blowers [Protection] Bill. They are doing this so that the people's instrument to expose their corruption is blunted. Let us not forget that defaulters and criminals fleeing the country on such a scale is unprecedented. They have no other work except to harass and defame the opposition.

In the just-concluded Parliament session, we saw opposition parties coordinating to hold the government to account. But can this floor management be converted into real unity during the general election — one opposition candidate against one BJP candidate?

It's too early to say anything. A decision will be taken at the highest level in due course in consultation with like-minded parties by the Congress president.

At the recent Congress plenary, Sonia Gandhi spoke of opposition alliances. Will she continue to be the main person who will talk to other parties or will the work be divided between her and Rahul Gandhi?

She is the chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party. And Rahulji being the party chief, naturally he will discuss [such matters] with Soniaji, Manmohan Singhji and other senior leaders before taking a final decision.

What should Mr. Gandhi's focus be? To rebuild the party organisation or focus on Assembly elections in the run-up to 2019?

Both. To win any election, the first condition is to have a strong organisation. The priority is to defeat the BJP in the national interest. I think he is concentrating on both.

Do you think your victory in the Rajya Sabha elections and the results of the Gujarat Assembly elections were turning points for the Congress?

Not only the Rajya Sabha election. Even though we could not form the government in Gujarat, the nature of the outcome has definitely boosted the morale of Congress workers and other like-minded parties.

Could Gujarat have been won with more planning?

Yes. But at the same time, the results are not that bad. They have boosted the morale of the workers not only in Gujarat but across the country. And credit should go to the hard work of the Congress president and his team. In Gujarat and other States, the agencies and government machinery were misused. At the same time, I must accept that their booth management is better than ours, maybe because of money and muscle power. And Tripura is the best example of that.

You mention Tripura. You were not just defeated there, you were wiped out.

In Tripura, we were always in the opposition.

Your vote share went from 36.5% to 1.8%.

Most of our strong leaders there defected to the BJP. We don't know if it was an ideological defection or something else. Those who have defected will soon realise the difference between the Congress and the BJP. And as I just mentioned, they misused the agencies, government machinery and they have immense money and muscle power which helped them gather votes. Forming a government on such a basis is only a one-time formula.

Some of your party people in the Northeast say that your alliance with the Left in West Bengal cost you in Tripura and that whenever Central Ministers during the UPA rule would go to Agartala, they would be full of praise for Manik Sarkar's government.

That's a contradiction that has to be tackled, but it is not difficult. In a democracy, it is normal if we converge on national issues but diverge on local issues. We may be opponents in States and yet remain partners at the Centre, because safeguarding the nation's interest is supreme, and such situations have to be eventually accommodated. Being a national party, such cases have to be handled in a balanced manner.

Not just in the Northeast, even in Kerala our State unit is unhappy about our alliance in West Bengal. But eventually it is only the Congress that can give a platform for diverse parties to come together and unite opponents in a State for a larger national cause. We have done this in the past and can do this in the future.

At the Congress plenary, why didn't Mr. Gandhi provide a plan of action for party workers?

I think it is being worked out. You can't have an action plan without hearing the suggestions of others. At the plenary, he gave young leaders and others a platform to voice their opinions and suggestions.

Why is the Congress still grappling with accusations of Muslim appeasement on the one hand and accusations of being ‘soft saffron’ on the other?

What is the definition of secularism? The Congress believes in standing alongside all communities and helping all of them fulfil their aspirations in India. We refuse to see communities as hierarchical. That is the creed on which independent India has been built, where every individual, every community has the space to achieve its highest potential. And when there is social harmony and cohesion, people are able to achieve their fullest potential. Over the last four years, this simple fact — that all communities and citizens are seen as equal in front of the law and for the government — has been in jeopardy. But as the Congress has done for the last 130 years, we will stand by every community. We shall celebrate their achievements and safeguard their interests.

Why is that message not articulated in that way?

There are some people in the country who don't want such messages to percolate down, the reason being that their shops will close.

Harsh Mander, who was a member of Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council, expressed his sadness that Muslims were becoming invisible even within the Congress.

I listened to her very carefully. In my opinion, her comments are being taken out of context.

On the issue of caste and reservation, what is the Congress' position?

The Congress has always stood for social justice. And we will continue to work towards that goal. As far as reservation is concerned, there is no question of any change.

So the Congress is pro-reservation for SCs, STs, and OBCs?

Of course — and we will stick to it. Not only that, those who will try to dilute it, we have opposed it and will continue to oppose it, tooth and nail.

There is almost no Congress today in West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and now even in parts of the Northeast.

It is not true. We are weak in these States but we still have a substantial vote share. In fact, in West Bengal and most of the Northeast, we are a significant force. However, we will have to work very hard at the grass-roots level. And this is exactly what is being done by the Congress president. The situation will definitely improve.

What about building grass-roots leaders in the States?

We are a mass-based party but training is absolutely necessary. You will have to work at the booth level, go house to house. Identifying and nurturing grass-roots leaders is a priority for the Congress president. This was reflected in our plenary and in the recent appointments in the AICC [All India Congress Committee].

Do you think you erred in bifurcating Andhra Pradesh? You lost both Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

What's the point of talking about this issue now? I don't want to comment on it. But at the same time I expect the Central government to fulfil its promises which were given on the floor of the House during the bifurcation process.

What are your prospects in Karnataka?

Of course we will win and form the government with the support of the people of Karnataka.

During the Rajiv Gandhi era and the Manmohan Singh period, you were offered a ministership. Why did you choose to work in the organisation rather than in the government?

It is nothing but my mindset which encourages me to work for the organisation. I always felt that the party is a better medium to serve the people. Government and ministries come and go but the party is always there. If you don't have a post, you can still work as an ordinary Congress worker.

You clearly still have a critical role to play in the Congress. With the change of president, what would you like it to be?

The Congress has given me a lot. I would have remained an unknown person in my village but today I owe my identity to the Congress. The party has already given me a lot. I am grateful to my leadership. But it's time new, young faces get a chance in the Congress as they represent the future of the party as well as the country.

You have worked with three generations of the Gandhi family. How do Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi differ?

It is difficult for me to compare. Everyone's working style is not the same but ultimately they have a common goal — to strengthen the party and uphold national interest.

You were parliamentary secretary to Rajiv Gandhi and then had a very long stint as political secretary to Sonia Gandhi. What were they like to work with?

I have already answered this question. As I have said, the style may be different but the goal is the same. But one thing I can say is that they all believed in consensus and consultation.

So, Sonia Gandhi's method was consensus-building within the top leadership.

It has already been answered.

When Sonia Gandhi became party president, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was at the peak of his career. How difficult was it?

I don't think it was as difficult as compared to the present situation. Vajpayeeji was a very reasonable person who used to respect the opposition and was a believer of consultation, which is absent today.

But it was difficult to defeat Vajpayee?

Yes, the challenge of the 'India Shining' campaign was difficult but not impossible because, in reality, Bharat wasn't shining.

However, the perception was built then that Vajpayeeji is coming back. But the people of India eventually chose the Congress. Our victory was also possible

because of the hard work of Soniaji, timely alliances, and the support of lakhs of Congressmen and women.

[A shorter version of this interview appeared in *The Hindu* dated April 18, 2018, and can be accessed [here](#).]

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In 1992-93, she was a Reuter Fellow at Oxford University, U.K. During her year at Oxford, she wrote a long paper on The Emergence of the Far Right in West Europe. She has contributed chapters in academic books on the Bharatiya Janata Party, the politics of Uttar Pradesh, and Parliament. She holds an M.A. degree from Delhi University.)