

Is a generational change in political command good enough? Can India expect to do any better in coming decades?

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As every New Year raises new hopes of change in the affairs of the country as the way Deepavali raises hopes, this year RSS too did as it completed 100 years. As those celebrations continue, the hope continues that we see a New India soon, much sooner. General belief today however is that no significant change comes as sought without a generational change in the politics of the country. Are there any signals in favour of such transition? Can we expect a new generation at the helm of affairs of the country? Many thought, sixty years ago in early sixties, of a generational change. That was what "after Nehru who" concern was all about. An underlying expectation was emerge of a new leadership. The "Kamaraj Plan" (1963) raised that hope even more. With exit of "old Congress" of S. K. Patil, Atulya Gosh, Nijalingappa, Sanjeev Reddy, etc., a generational change was expected. But no sooner such hopes were belied with Indira Gandhi consolidating her hold and continuing with a High command culture although she claimed youth and experience.

My analysis of trends in governance and electoral politics brings out that we missed good opportunity of generational change thrice before since after Nehru's death in 1964 and one this decade. Of course, it is obvious that no generational change is possible in a five-year span. But at least signals should be evident for such a change in a decade. The first period we missed was 1967-1987. In fact, during this period there were such flashes at least three times. The young ones, particularly the student community marked their presence than ever before and in more than a couple of states. It was in 1967 that a 29-year-old had become the Chief Minister of a state elected not once but three times and he was not from a majority community nor belonged to a political family that was M.O.H. Farook in Pondicherry. In five years there after Nav Nirman Samithi, born out of treatment meted out to students in Baroda, spread to Bihar and became the launchpad for JP Movement with several firebrand young leaders finding their way into mainstream politics. But in 1977 when the chance came none of them were even mattered in changing the course. Instead, the preference was for a well over 80-year-old leader who could lost hardly two years. Then a student leader was elected Chief Minister of another state in turmoil in 1985, not by fluke but twice. During these years another state too witnessed youth leading an agitation lead by student leaders like M Venkaiah Naidu as if signalling that young visualises future far more seriously for the prospects of that state. During this period another firebrand, who inspired many youth next decades, had become the youngest Cabinet Minister in any state. That was Sushma Swaraj at 25. She signalled compulsions for the then opposition party with two members in Lok Sabha to take on younger ones to emerge as a force multiplying several fold. These occasions should have sparked a generational change at the helm, but India missed.

The next decade when India missed yet another opportunity was during 1992-2004 period. It rather preferred uncertain times at the helm as if reminding "who after Nehru times". Four "seniors" were chosen to fill the vacuum, three of them Delhi based and neither could last long enough to make a difference. In that process a young state Chief Minister with impressive credentials then, who played a critical role in selecting the leaders in Delhi twice, was not ushered into the position in New Delhi. That would have signalled a generational change. Coalition times are expected to bring in younger ones as much as the oldies to survive. But that too has not happened in the nation despite that it was already known as a "country of young".

We are now going through a decade when unlike ever before, one person is in a position with potential to launch a generational change and rare opportunity to go down in the history as the one who lead a revolutionary change without a bottom up revolution. Such initiatives will last longer, as in the case of single handed decision to give a new look to the Indian parliament and the Capitol of the country. A generational change now in fact goes much beyond in making a difference nook and corner of the country. Narendra Modi's initiatives could be the next big game changer of the country beyond an electoral cycle. Now to next decade, encompassing two general elections, it is possible to do what none of his predecessors ever even tried. Such an opportunity is still there.

When could we say the country is going through a generational change? Four factors contribute that process. Age and education of people at the helm setting the agenda and priorities for the country and responsible for the kind of public systems and services people end up with. The other two factors are the Track they come from as to family antecedents, son or daughter, and the extent of Team spirit or work together culture and outlook, with which the next generation representatives and leaders work with. Relevance of "past experience" which continues to be a standing justification for continuation, is never objectively talked about with a futures perspective.

A glaring peculiarity is age of those representing the people of the country. That perhaps was ok 75 years ago as most leaders then came from freedom movement. Today, three fourth of MP s, for example, are of well over 50 years constituting only 12 percent of population. While two thirds of people are of below 35 years, the average age of an Indian today is 28 years. Well over ten million are being added as voters on becoming 18 at the general election. Every election time, parties have been promising giving more representation for young never fulfilling. Also, while everyone else in public service has age limits, there is nothing like that in the case of those who are expected to represent and reflect people as to their anxieties and expectations nor is there culture of voluntarily retiring.

When the voting age was reduced from 21 to 18 years in 1985, the expectation was that there would be some improvement in the representation of youth. But even after 30 years and

after six general elections, hardly any difference is seen despite that youth today are better educated, exposed, skilled and more knowledgeable. Even education level of those in legislatures at various levels and even the cabinet of ministers in most states is disappointing as if that education is of no consequence to governance. 15 to 48 percent of Ministers in the cabinets of most states had hardly completed high school. In September 2025, Nepal has reduced voting age to 16 from 18 after that “Gen Z” moment.

Also the track of representatives and many ministers continue to indicate that it is wealth, connection and the family continues to be more critical for getting into positions in the ranks of power. Even after amendments to panchayat raj act thirty years ago, substantially increasing representation to women obligatory, their percent in legislatures has hardly changed. Nor there are leaders who crossed 75 years voluntarily retiring. Nanaji Deshmukh an upright leader stands out for an example he had set. He voluntarily retired three decades ago taking to a high moral ground and took up development works setting up Deen Dayal Ashram at Chitrakot. He never looked back. Neelam Sanjiva Reddy another senior leader retired voluntarily but re-entered and contested election after a gap of thirteen years.

A change is visible in the country in terms of age, education, sex and knowledge levels of youth of the country. There cannot be two opinions of the urgency of bettering “representative character” of elected ones by taking initiatives specially geared for generational change. Count down for such a change should start now by next August 15 or Republic day, January 26. This could be by upholding what is already promised every election time for some years. That is bettering the number of youth and women in the legislatures. Second, leaders of parties should publicly resolve to deny nomination of those with corruption and criminal charges. There are more than 3500 in the present and recent past legislatures against whom criminal cases are pending in the courts for several years. They too should be denied. Then nomination of those from a political family again and again should end. Unless this process is evident by 2029, we will not see much needed generational change in the command of governance and politics by 2050, that is when the Republic will be hundred-year-old.

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