

headline news. Events such as these are an important pointer to the present political situation in India, where a general election must be called some time this year.

Indira Gandhi's Congress Party was swept back into power in January 1980, winning 352 of the 544 seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house). Subsequent elections to various state legislatures however suggest that a similar degree of support would not be forthcoming now. While the Congress Party is in no state to fight an election at present, Mrs Gandhi's main asset seems to be the weakness and division of the opposition. However, there are indications that the opposition parties could potentially become more united than at any time in the recent past.

In May 1983 the first of a series of opposition party meetings took place, attended by 13 parties, including 6 regional ones, and the two Communist Parties. The initial meeting adopted a rather bland statement expressing concern at threats to the unity of India posed by regional movements; the erosion of political morality, particularly where the Congress is concerned; and the need for a revision of centre-state relations. By the beginning of this year, at the fourth and fifth opposition parties' meetings, more detailed resolutions elaborating on these themes, and linking them to a programme of economic reforms, were adopted. No one has claimed that these meetings constitute an electoral alliance, but they are clearly helping to define the issues which an anti-Congress electoral alliance would take up.

Since Mrs Gandhi's return to power in 1980 the economy has performed neither spectacularly badly, nor particularly well. But persistent and increasing economic hardship, especially for the 40% plus below the official poverty line, is one of the main factors underlying what is undoubtedly the most serious problem facing India today - the question of the relationship between the central and state governments. Opposition parties of all hues argue that the states' powers have been whittled away in the years since independence, a process helped by the Congress Party's domination over both central and state legislatures for much of the period. More recently, non-Congress governments have come to power in the states and find themselves dependent on Delhi for final ratification of certain state laws, and for important elements of their finance. The Left Front government of West Bengal, for example, has been waiting for several years for ratification of land



reform bills, held up for no apparent reason.

Early last year, after 10 years or more of the question being raised, particularly by the CPI(M), a government commission into centre-state relations has been set up to examine these constitutional questions. However, the tension between the Congress central government and state opposition governments is only one of the forms

**INDIA - A CRISIS OF IDENTITY?**

Recent events in India, particularly the Indian army's assault on the Golden Temple at Amritsar and the subsequent hijacking of a plane to Pakistan, have all made

the centre-state questions takes. The other form is mass agitation, often accompanied by violence against representatives of central authority. The most important of these movements have been in Assam, and more recently, Punjab.

The current phase of agitation among Sikhs in Punjab can be dated to the middle of 1982, although many of the issues have been the subject of fruitless discussions over the last 15 years. In 1982 the Akali Dal - a regional, predominantly Sikh party - put forward several demands covering both Sikh religious issues, and secular questions concerning the whole of Punjab. Among the latter were questions concerning the distribution of land and water resources between Punjab and neighbouring Haryana (carved out of Punjab in 1966), the transfer of the city of Chandigarh to Punjab, and the question of more autonomy for the state.

At this stage a minority in the Akali Dal, under the leadership of Bhindranwale, wanted to pursue several more extreme and socially divisive demands. One of these was for the creation of Punjab as a Sikh majority state, although Sikhs are already 60% of the state population, and included ideas like the disenfranchisement of migrant labourers in the state, and the

creation of a fully autonomous state - Khalistan. However, in late 1982 and early 1983 the Akali Dal leadership was able to contain these demands from within its ranks, and to support an attempt to negotiate a solution to Punjab's problems with the central government.

The Akali Dal leaders' stance was not helped by the attitude of the Congress Party - the ruling power in the state at that time, as well as in Delhi. Initially the Congress refused to talk, and Akali Dal leaders and activists were arrested. Later however, agreement was reached, on everything except on some of the political issues, on two separate occasions; but each time the central government apparently refused to proceed to complete the agreement.

In the meantime, from early in 1983, the more extreme Sikhs under Bhindranwale launched a campaign of terror at first in Punjab, and later towards the end of the year in the capital itself. By the end of the year, with no talks taking place, and all emphasis on the terrorist movement, the central government began to categorise the problem as one of individual terrorist acts. It was a short step from this to the decision to restore control by sending the army into the Golden Temple. The results of the

failure to reach a political solution earlier in the year were that there was little option but to engage in a confrontation which was bound to inflame Sikh feelings and unite them to a greater extent than before. Now, over a month after the army went in, troops are still on the streets of Amritsar, Sikh terrorists are still capable of hijacking a plane, and the original issues behind the crisis remain totally unresolved.

The next stages in the conflict in Punjab are not yet clear - perhaps there will be more violence, or perhaps the discussions will resume once more, and conflict will move from the streets back to the committee rooms, as in Assam. Whatever happens next, these conflicts clearly indicate that India's political development has reached a critical stage. The Congress Party's strategy of maintaining Indian unity by the dominance of the centre has been tried once before - by the British, and we know where that led to. Whether the forthcoming elections (assuming they are called) will result in the return of the Congress Party to power, or the emergence of a political coalition with different plans for tackling the present political crisis will probably set the stage for Indian political life for the rest of the century.

*Charles Ashleigh*

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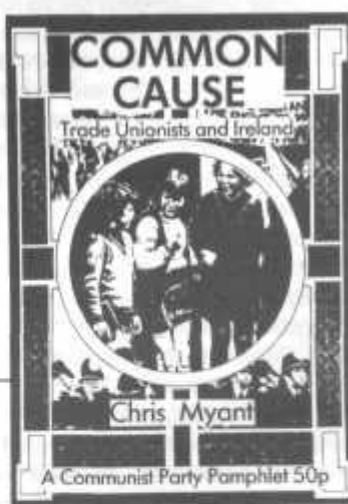
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