



INDIA AT CROSSROADS

The Indian general election, the eighth in the country's independent history, may possibly be seen in years to come as the most crucial

FOCUS

of them all. It took place amid the gravest national crisis since 1947, one which raised doubts abroad about India's viability as a unified state.

Indira Gandhi's assassination and its violent aftermath were the flashpoints of a crisis over Punjab that had been simmering for a number of years. There was also the problem of Assam and regional pulls and tensions elsewhere, not to speak of the chemical disaster at Bhopal. Western media men and women and political pundits, as part of a now familiar routine, busily prognosticated the approaching apocalypse - which was either India's Balkanisation or the long expected military takeover. Incantations on the conflicting cross-currents of caste, religion, language and tribe were repeated *ad nauseum* in print, television and radio and reinforced with selective offerings from a class of Indian 'experts' who dutifully mouthed their lines and pocketed their thirty pieces of silver.

The doom-laden prophets with their Cassandra cries had got it wrong again. India refused to break up or break down; there was no hung parliament, no wafer-thin majority for the new government as many in Washington and Whitehall must have prayed for, and no prejudice shown towards the Prime Minister on account of his Italian wife. Instead, an electoral 'tidal wave, a tornado', to quote the *Times of India*, swept Rajiv Gandhi to a triumph undreamt of by his grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru or his mother Indira Gandhi at the peak of her power. Out of the 515 seats contested, the ruling Congress won 401 with over 50% of the popular vote, more in fact than the Labour Party had managed to achieve in 1945.

If this was indeed a backlash, it was not a Hindu backlash but an Indian backlash against attempts to weaken their country through co-ordinated foreign and domestic pressure, the sort that had brought down Salvador Allende in Chile, broken Mosaddegh in Iran and seeks to destroy the Sandanista regime in Nicaragua today. Responding to Rajiv Gandhi's call for unity, answering the echoed warnings of his mother, Indians throughout the land, in north, south (except in Andhra), east and west, transcended caste, religious and linguistic loyalties and affirmed that India in the midst of its diversity must remain one.

However, the election was more than just an affirmation of national identity. In voting for Rajiv Gandhi, the electorate affixed its seal of approval for the collective achievements of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. These were as follows: a nation state built on secular democratic foundations;

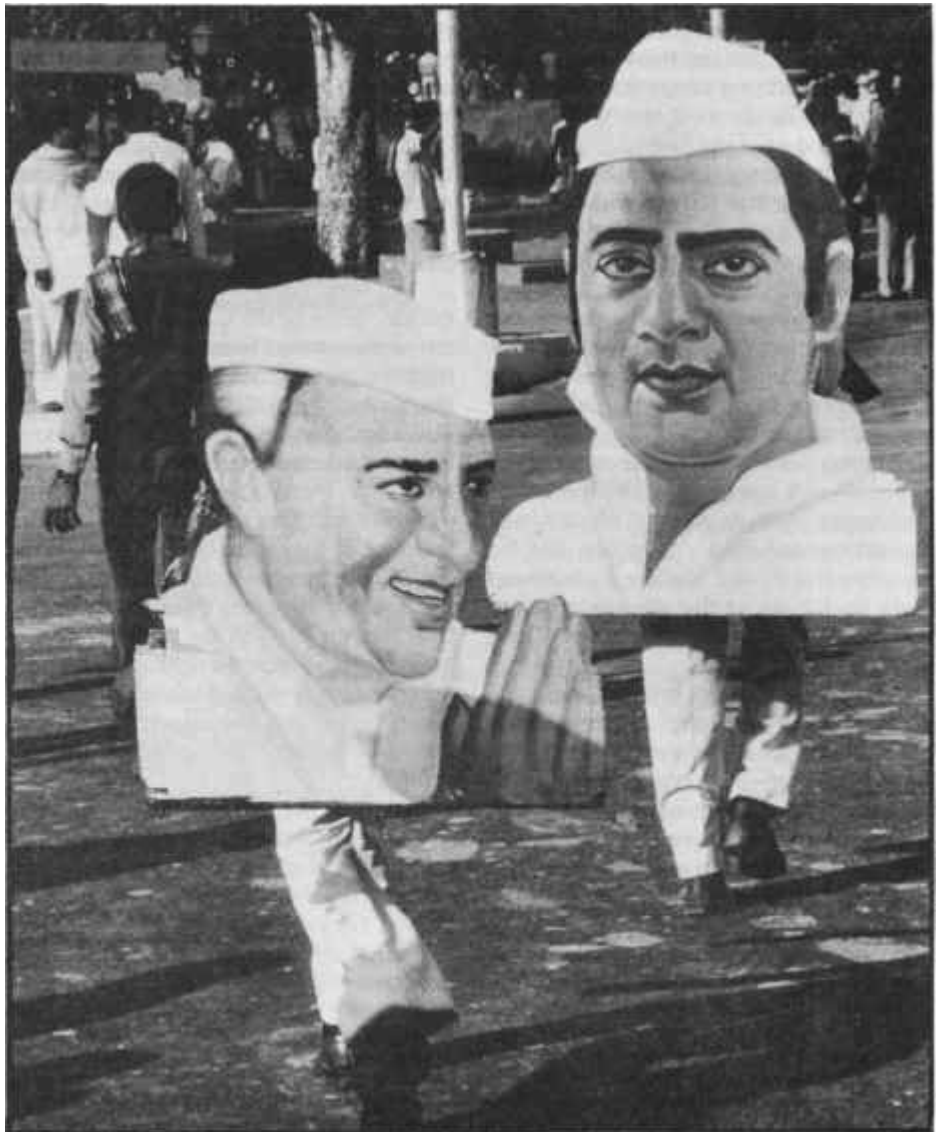
institutions resting on the separation of powers; parliament as the supreme expression of the popular will; the existence of a free press (which incidentally reflects a greater diversity of political opinion than is usually found in its British counterpart); the creation of a productive agriculture locked into an industrial machine driven by the latest advances of science and technology; and finally, a country which had defined for itself its place in the international community in keeping with its own vision of a world stalked by the spectre of nuclear war.

In muscular terms, India currently stands among the ten foremost industrialised powers; its agriculture has heaved itself to a point where a growing population can be fed without recourse to overseas grain imports, while 75% of its energy requirements are domestically produced. It is free of the international debt trap that has ensnared

countries as diverse as Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines and Poland. It is unique among Third World nations for having borrowed heavily from the International Monetary Fund and returned a sizeable part of the loan unused. Indian military might is more formidable than it has ever been, yet the military establishment carries less weight politically than, say, the Pentagon in America.

Furthermore, India has a foreign policy conceived and executed in the national interest. Within the general framework of non-alignment, India's close relations with the Soviet Union, one of the stables anywhere, have sustained it through some of its worst moments, notably in 1971, when it successfully withstood the combined challenge of Pakistan, China and the United States. This relationship has also given India a

'Available from: NAC, Wesley House, 70 Great Queen Street, London WC2B 5AX.



India after Indira - Rajiv Gandhi faces electoral test.

FOCUS

significant measure of economic independence and cushioned it from the worst effects of the international capitalist recession. At the same time it has not proved an impediment to fruitful ties between India and countries of Western Europe, particularly Britain, France and West Germany, and America as well.

The paradoxes of India, its successes and failures, need to be placed upon a continental-size canvas with its bewildering blend of regional colours. Europe as a single entity would offer the nearest parallel. India is still a nation in transition on the grand scale. Feudalism, early forms of capitalism and advanced industrialisation exist cheek by jowl, as do related institutions, technologies and outlooks. As social change has generally been subject to minimal government control, traditional patterns of behaviour have mutated under the multiple pressures of new modes of production, distribution and exchange. In such a society the tug of the old barbarism is rarely far from the surface, drawing its terrifying power from its sectarianism, with its demonic emphasis on the externals and rituals of faith.

Indian democracy, established as a complete unit on a low cultural and economic base, was in a sense born before its time. Much of Western Europe and Japan became democratic polities only after World War II. Even Britain, the oldest liberal democracy, granted women the vote as late as 1928. Political structures in each of these areas grew basically from rapidly expanding and sophisticated industries. With these had come mass literacy and higher standards of living for rich and poor alike. The Indian experiment, with its reversal of such well marked trends is thus a novel one. But the country's friends and foes are both agreed that it has taken root, that whosoever wishes to succeed in India must abide by democratic practices.

In displaying their faith in Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian masses have also expressed their desire for change. They have put in charge a largely untested and untried young man, sensitive to the past but unencumbered by it. The mouldering political and administrative structures are in need of urgent renewal. The economy, shackled to old dogmas and cumbersome bureaucratic controls, requires reorganisation, pruning and greater exposure to foreign currents, if it is to fulfil its true potential. This call for change has come when the most critical years of primitive capital accumulation are behind India. Among those making it are a whole new generation of politicised men and women.

Premen Addy