

Rajiv Gandhi meets the press

India rejects Rajiv

Sagarika Dutt comments on the outcome of the recent Indian elections which resulted in the formation of a new government.

On 2 December 1989, after a month of vigorous and exciting canvassing and electioneering, a coalition government was installed in New Delhi for the first time in India's history. The new National Front government is headed by Vishwanath Pratap Singh, who has for a long time now been considered to be Rajiv's likely successor. However up to the last minute it was not certain whether or not he would be the Prime Minister. There were other contenders, notably Devi Lal and Chandra Shekhar. But, as one National Front candidate pointed out, most of the National Front candidates had fought the elections in Singh's name, so who else could be the Prime Minister?

Sagarika Dutt, a post-graduate student at the University of Kent, Canterbury, was in India during the election.

In the year preceding the election the popularity of the Congress (I) and its leader, Rajiv Gandhi, had declined sharply. Following the assassination of his mother, Indira Gandhi, by one of her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, Rajiv had been swept into power by a wave of sympathy which gave him a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the parliament. At that time Rajiv, who Indira had been grooming for years to succeed her, had the support of the whole nation and of all the political veterans, who were more concerned about the country's political stability than anything else. They thus turned a blind eye to Rajiv's inexperience.

The tremendous power and influence that Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, both charismatic and astute politicians, wielded over the minds and hearts of the people of India was demonstrated, by the nation's selection of Rajiv as the Prime Minister, a man without a track-record whose only asset was that he was

Indira's son. The feudal mentality of the Indian people was perhaps partly responsible as well.

Except for a brief period between 1977 and 1980, when the Janata Party took advantage of Indira Gandhi's unpopularity because of the imposition of the state emergency and the severe curtailment of civil liberties to oust her from office, the Congress Party has always been in power. Established in 1885, the Indian National Congress played a major role in India's struggle for freedom from British rule. In 1947 Jawaharlal Nehru, a member of the Congress, became India's first Prime Minister. After his death, in 1969, the Congress split into two, the Congress (O) and the Congress (R). In January 1978, there was another split due to personal differences between the leaders. Indira Gandhi and her supporters established the Congress (I), while Dev Raj Urs, then Chief Minister of Karnataka, formed the Congress (U).

Interestingly enough, Singh himself

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used to be a member of the Congress (I) until about two years ago. He was the Finance Minister and the Defence Minister in Rajiv Gandhi's government until he quit in protest against high level corruption.

Wide support

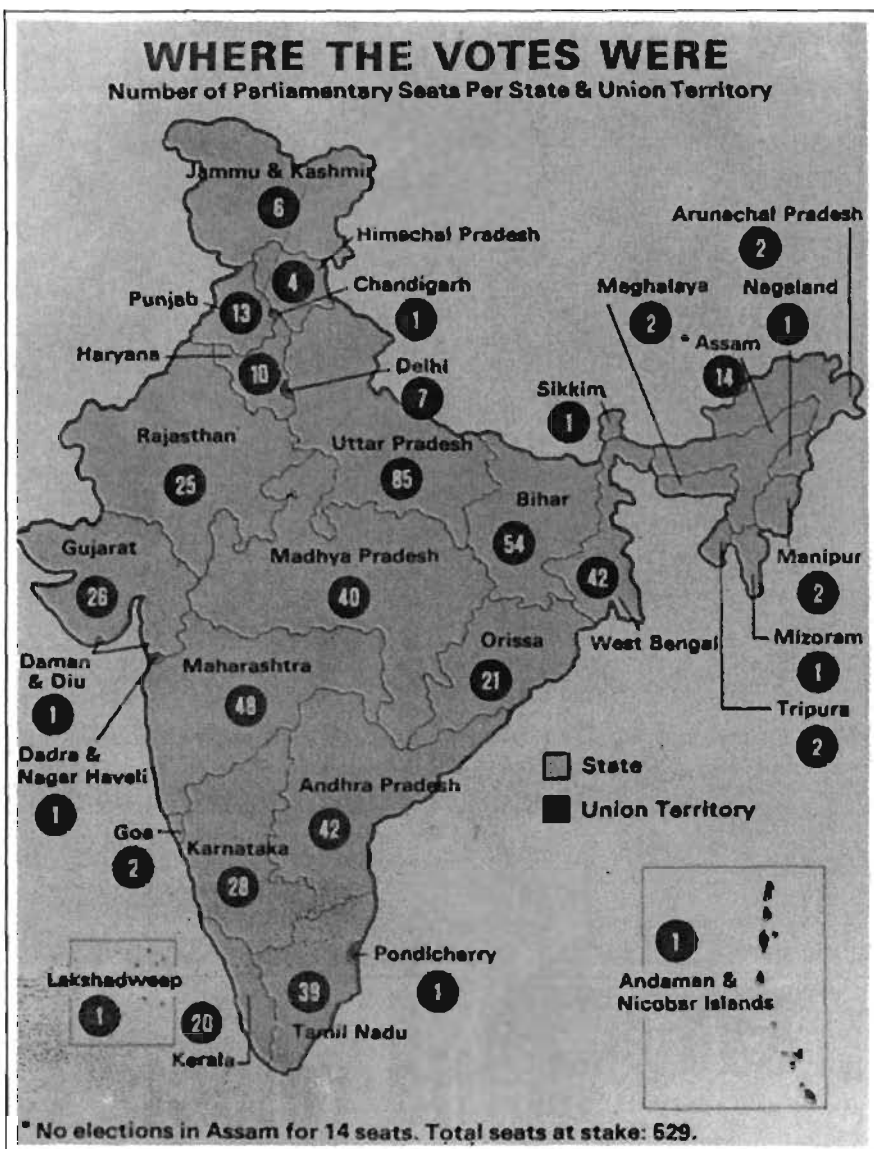
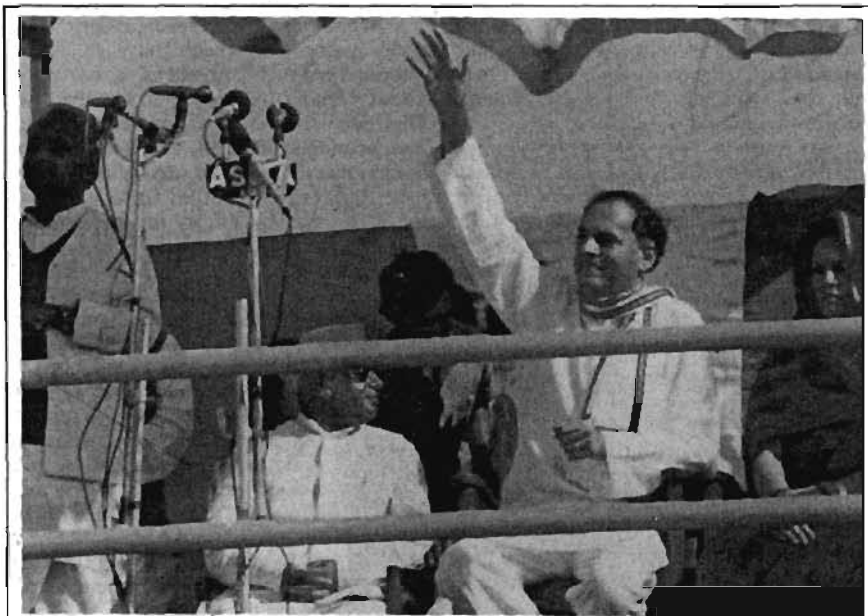
The Congress Party's firm commitment to secularism has always enabled it to capture the minority votes. In a heterogeneous country like India, with 22 states each with a distinct cultural identity of its own, sixteen official languages, large religious minorities such as the Muslims and the Sikhs and the caste system which has created divisions even within the Hindu community, the Congress governments have, over the last forty-two years, done a fairly good job of promoting national integration and preventing national disintegration.

Secessionist movements in various parts of the country, notably in the Punjab, Kashmir and the north-eastern hill states, have been dealt with capably and in a fairly democratic manner. Great efforts have been made to create an awareness of the need to strengthen national unity. Congress governments have, in the main, tried to live up to the ideals of a 'Socialist Secular Democratic Republic' enshrined in its rather lengthy constitution. They have succeeded in maintaining for the last forty-two years a political stability which most of India's neighbours have not known for any great length of time.

Largest party

Although non-Congress (I) governments do exist in some of the states, like West Bengal and Kerala, and have done so for many years, no opposition party is a match for the Congress (I) at the national level. Even in the recent elections the Congress (I) emerged as the largest single party in the Lok Sabha. Opposition parties were able to defeat the Congress (I)

Rajiv Gandhi with his wife Sonia



only by forging some kind of unity among themselves.

The opposition used every trick in the book to oust Rajiv. Charges of corruption and incompetence, the Bofors scan-

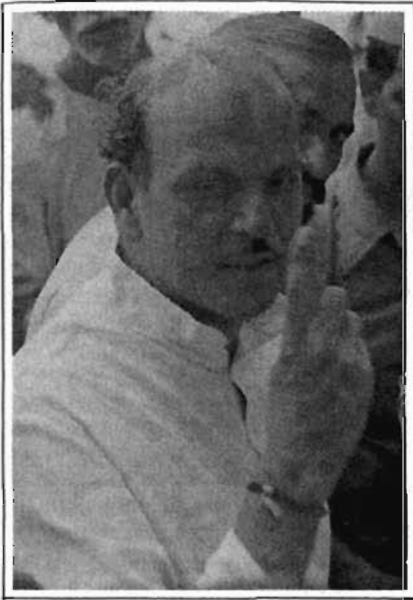
dal, which Rajiv's government has been unable to live down, the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid issue, which the opposition used skilfully, all served their purpose. As a result, the Congress (I) limped out of power, having won only 192 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha. This is in marked contrast to its performance in the last general elections, in which it had won 415 seats.

Several Congress (I) stalwarts such as Balram Jakher, who had been the Speaker of the Lok Sabha for many years, Buta Singh, the Home Minister, and Natwar Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs and a familiar figure at NAM and CHOGM meetings, lost their seats. The Congress (I)'s last minute panic made itself felt in many constituencies, including the Prime Minister's own constituency in Amethi, where there was violence and bloodshed and alleged rigging and the opposition candidate, Sanjay Singh, was shot at and severely wounded.

Communal Issue

In India politics and religion have always been inextricably mixed up. Communal tensions are quite common and often

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V.P. Singh, India's new Prime Minister

have political repercussions. In his public speeches Rajiv Gandhi has frequently, and quite legitimately, warned against the dangers of religious fundamentalism. However, in the recent elections the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid issue, which is a communal issue, was exploited by both the Congress (I) and the opposition for political gains. Ayodhya became India's Jerusalem.

Ayodhya, which is in the state of Uttar Pradesh in North India, is the birth place of Lord Rama, the legendary Hindu king worshipped by the Hindus. In Ayodhya there is a mosque called the Babri Masjid. Some Hindus claim that the mosque stands on Ram's *janam bhoomi* or birth place.

For many years there has been a dispute between the Hindus and the Muslims over the possession of this site. In June 1984, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu fundamentalist organisation, launched a Ram Janambhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti with some *sadhus* (Hindu holy men) to liberate the site. In February 1986 the district judge ordered the opening of locks, allowing unhindered access to Hindus. In reaction to this the Babri Masjid Action Committee was launched by the Muslim community.

Temple plans

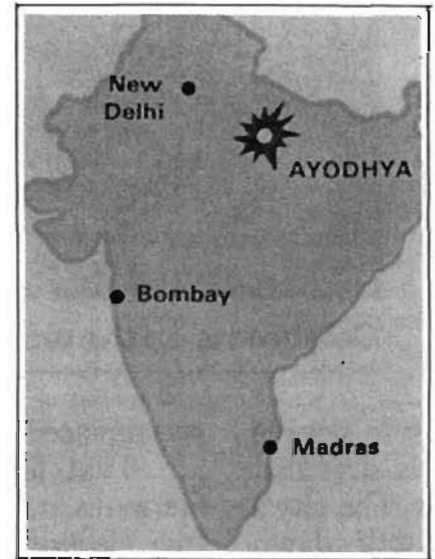
In February 1989, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the *sadhus* called for the building of a Shri Ram Temple in Ayodhya in the disputed area. However, a directive to maintain the status quo was issued by the high court in August, it being stated that the parties 'shall not change the nature of property in question.' The main parties to the suit were the Sunni Waqf Board, the State government, Ram Janambhoomi Nyas represented by Ashok Singhal, former judge and VHP leader Deoki Nandan Agarwal and various Hindu and Muslim priests.

In September, the VHP signed an accord with the government to abide by the directive. Nonetheless, on 2 November, just a few weeks before the elections, it put up a flag at the site. Although the high court on 7 November clarified that the site was disputed, the Congress (I) government two days later allowed the VHP to perform *shilanyas* or the foundation-laying ceremony. This followed the Uttar Pradesh advocate-general's explanation, after he had investigated the matter, that the *shilanyas* site lies outside the disputed Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi premises. The claim made by a government official that this explanation would defuse the crisis brewing over the *shilanyas* ceremony could be proved correct only if the Muslim leaders of the Babri Masjid Action Committee also felt that the advocate-general's explanation was satisfactory.'

Leadership qualities

On the day the *shilanyas* were to be performed, Singh visited Ayodhya with a view to persuading the VHP to abandon, at least temporarily, its plan to lay the foundation stone of the Shri Ram temple. By doing so he showed his commitment to the cause of communal amity in Ayodhya and braved the wrath of the BJP, a pro-Hindu political party and his electoral ally. Singh was not unaware of the danger of his stand on Ayodhya alienating him even from some elements within his own Janata Dal and within the National Front at large. The fact that he adopted the stand regardless of the risks involved greatly enhanced his personal stature as a leader who is not afraid to court unpopularity and even to forgo political gain in order to safeguard the larger interests of the country.'

While the ceremonies were being performed, the two communist parties, the CPI and the CPM, held a large rally in Faizabad, a nearby town, to protest

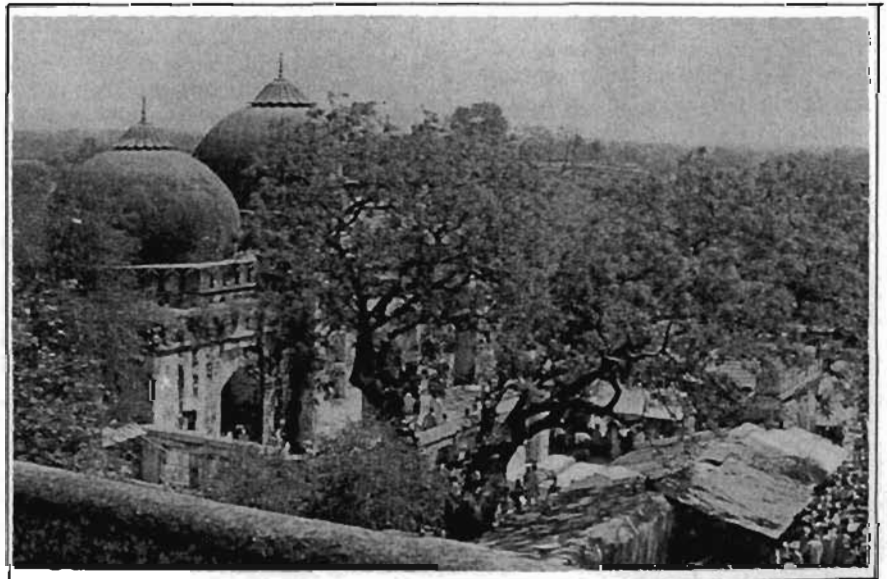


against the 'blatant communal show' put up by the VHP 'in collusion with the government'.

Muslim response

The reaction to the developments among the Muslims was sharp. Leaders of the community from all over the country appeared hurt at what they described as a total let down by the state government. About 1000 Muslims courted arrest in protest against what they claimed was 'VHP-Congress complicity' in performing the foundation-laying ceremony of the proposed Ram temple. The All-India Babri Masjid Action Committee (AIBMAC) called upon all Muslims 'to give a befitting lesson to the Congress in the elections so that no other party dares to adopt such a communal strategy in future.' A statement issued by several members of the AIBMAC indicated that the Muslims would initiate contempt of

The disputed site at Ayodhya



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A Gandhi campaign poster

court proceedings against the government and the VHP.¹

The ruling party was faced with a grim dilemma. On one hand, it had to uphold the law, which meant that the VHP could not be allowed to lay the foundation stone in an area defined as a 'land of dispute' by a special bench of the Allahabad high court. Firmness on this count was the minimum the Muslim community expected of the government. On the other hand, the government could not ignore the strength of Hindu sentiment regarding the *shilanyas*, especially just a few weeks before the elections. The Congress (I) leadership, therefore, had to perform a very delicate balancing act.²

Foreign concern

Meanwhile, across the border in Pakistan, in the Sukkur district of Sindh, a crowd angry at the alleged desecration of a mosque in India attacked Hindu temples and shops. The Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, directed the Sind chief minister, Syed Quaim Ali Shah, to ensure full protection to the religious places of Hindus in the province. Nevertheless, she described as 'reprehensible' the Hindu hardliners' plan to go ahead with the construction of the temple by the side of the mosque.

The governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran also expressed concern over the masjid-temple dispute. The Saudi government described the prevailing situation in India as attempts by some 'irresponsible elements to harm the sentiments of Muslims and attack their faith.' The Congress (I) and some of the opposition parties denounced the statements by the leaders of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran as interference in India's internal affairs. 'India', a Congress (I) spokesman insisted, 'is a secular nation where all religions enjoy equal status and the minorities have protection and encouragement. . . we do not need any sermon from those who do not believe in it [secularism].'³

Rising fundamentalism

In recent years Hindu fundamentalism has been on the rise in India. Hindu fundamentalist organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have become more active and are gaining more prominence. Even pro-Hindu political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has links with both the VHP and the RSS, have become more popular. In the December 1989 elections the BJP won 88 seats, compared with only two in the last general elections. Without its support Singh could not have formed his government.

The rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India is partly a reaction to the rise both of Sikh fundamentalism in India and of Muslim fundamentalism in various parts of the world. However, there is another and a more important factor — the lack of a charismatic leader and an inspiring ideology. There is a vacuum which Hindu fundamentalism is now trying to fill. In a country like India, any sort of religious

Muslim protesters



fundamentalism can only lead to disharmony and conflict and eventually political instability.

Economic continuity

The broad regime of economic liberalisation so closely associated with Rajiv Gandhi is not a bone of contention between him and Singh. The neo-liberal consensus is shared by both and the neo-liberal trend is expected to continue under Singh. The two immediate problems confronting the new government are the heavy budget deficit and a serious balance of payments situation. Singh has said that priority will be given to these issues. Whether or not the new government will be able to deal with them satisfactorily remains to be seen. Considering its fragility, nobody really expects it to perform miracles.⁴

The broad directions of India's foreign and defence policies are also likely to remain unaltered under the new regime. The new Prime Minister has said that improving relations with China will have top priority 'in my foreign policy agenda', an approach which is in keeping with the Congress (I) government's efforts in recent times. As regards Sri Lanka, the National Front manifesto promises to secure the safety and security of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and to restore friendly relations with Colombo by withdrawing the Indian Peace Keeping Force, a process which is already well under way. However, National Front leaders Singh and M. Karunanidhi have made it clear that, like the outgoing government, they too will not defer to the Sri Lankan president's demand for a precipitate withdrawal of the Peace Keeping Force.

Amicable solution

Nepal has been promised negotiations on all issues of contention to find an amicable solution. Regarding Pakistan, the manifesto asks for mutual withdrawal of visa restrictions and promotion of bilateral commerce and trade. Both of these ideas are in line with current Indian pol-

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icy. On relations with the super-powers, Singh has indicated that he will strive to further strengthen the traditional friendship with the Soviet Union while making all efforts to improve relations with the United States and other Western countries.

Defence is another area in which there is a large national consensus in India. This is partly reflected in the total absence of debate in the country on the subject. The few who criticise the defence budget outlay usually have no constructive alternatives to offer. Singh's stand on defence spending is that 'we should have no illusions that we can slash it down'; 'while waste and bribery can be eliminated, we cannot allow our borders to remain undefended.'

Two personalities

The electorate was, therefore, not called upon to choose between alternative programmes and policies. The choice was between two personalities, Rajiv Gandhi and Singh, or perhaps more correctly between voting for Rajiv and the Congress (I) or not voting for them. So why did the majority of the Indian voters choose the latter option?

As noted above, Rajiv Gandhi's popularity has been gradually declining over the years. The 'corruption and incompetence' of the Congress (I) government, which both the media and the opposition have made great efforts to bring to the attention of the people, is probably nothing compared to what Rajiv himself has brought to their attention, that he is an alien in their midst. Rajiv

is practically a 'foreigner' in his own country. A typical yuppie, he is far too westernised, has an Italian wife, does not speak Hindi — or any other Indian language — fluently and is not very familiar with Indian history and culture. The terrible faux pas which he makes in his speeches certainly do not help in building a rapport between him and the people. In his effort to please both the traditionalists and the modernists, he has pleased neither. Both feel that he lacks conviction. His ignorance of the realities of Indian life is almost transparent. At the same time, considering his lack of experience, knowledge and the 'right' kind of cultural training, it must be said in all fairness that he has governed the country quite ably in the last five years.'

Real challenge

Up to the elections the opposition spent all its energies in devising strategies to oust Rajiv. Now that Singh has formed his new National Front government, he faces the real challenge, that of strengthening his position and ruling the country competently. His position is not enviable, for he has a difficult task to perform. He has not only to maintain harmony and a fair balance of power in the political clique which he is now leading and on the support of whose factions he is heavily dependent but also to live up to the expectations of the people. On the whole, the performance of the Congress (I) government in promoting economic growth, communal harmony and political stability has not been too bad. The new government, if it wants to remain in

power, will have to do even better and prove its worth.

Singh is an astute politician, but he does not have a sufficiently strong power base. What will he do if he is faced with a crisis? Either his 'supporters' will rally around him and see him through it or he will resign. He has been known to do that in the past.

The Indian people have known politicians of a high calibre and have great respect for them. They will not tolerate 'incompetence' for very long. It is possible that in the near future Rajiv will come back into power again, but it will have to be a different Rajiv, one with more political acumen. Meanwhile, he has a lot to learn sitting in the back benches.

NOTES

1. Pankaj Pachauri, 'Ayodhya — Communal Time-Bomb', *India Today*, 15 Dec 1989.
2. 'Be Firm On Ayodhya', *The Times of India* (Bombay), 7 Nov 1989.
3. 'Shilanyas' peaceful', and 'Temple Foundation Laid', *ibid.*, 10, 11 Nov 1989, respectively.
4. 'Good Sense On Ayodhya', *ibid.*, 10 Nov 1989.
5. 'Protect Temples, Orders Benazir', *ibid.*, 13 Nov 1989.
6. Dilip Mukherjee, 'New PM's Stand On Economic Issues', *ibid.*, 4 Dec 1989.
7. Dilip Mukherjee, 'No Major Changes Likely In Foreign Policy', *ibid.*
8. Chandan Mitra, 'Anti-Rajiv Backlash, The Price of Modernism', *ibid.*, 17 Nov 1989.

The inauguration of the new Congress headquarters in New Delhi, with a portrait of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and Rajiv Gandhi's grandfather

