

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Haryana: dangerous portent

The Devi Lal victory over the Congress (I) Party may send Punjab into a new spiral of chaos.

Even the term *roust* doesn't seem adequate for what took place in the June 17 Haryana elections, when the arrogant peasant mafioso Devi Lal's faction of the Lok Dal (People's Party) defeated the Congress (I), which had been in power in the state since 1982.

In a 90-member assembly, with elections for 87 seats, the Congress (I) could secure only 5. Chief Minister Bansi Lal, former Union Minister of Railways and chief minister of the state in the 1970s when Haryana made dramatic economic gains, was himself defeated by 2,100 votes. Of his 17-member cabinet, there was only one survivor. Nor was it a close fight. Opposition candidates won by margins ranging from 1,000 to 30,000 votes.

It was a defeat for the Congress (I), but projections of the Rajiv Gandhi government's imminent demise that abound here are undoubtedly premature. The Haryana defeat is surely a serious blow to the Congress (I), and even a warning of sorts. But its most far-reaching impact is more likely to be to throw a new monkey wrench into efforts to resolve the Punjab crisis.

One day after his swearing-in as Haryana's chief minister, Devi Lal announced his categorical rejection of the Punjab accord, the basis for a political settlement in Punjab, arrived at by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the late Sant Longowal in July 1985. The accord made it possible to restore an elected government and begin reviving the political process obliterated by terrorism.

Contrary to reports in the West, Haryana is not the crucial "Hindi heartland," where the fate of the Congress Party is signed and sealed; that distinction goes to the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh. Haryana is the land of affluent and tough Jat farmers, who formed the shock troops for the rich farmers' party, the Lok Dal.

In recent years, Haryana has become better known as the home of the three Lals—the defeated Chief Minister Bansi Lal, his fellow Congressman and rival Bhajan Lal, and Devi Lal. The fierce and shifting rivalries (and alliances) among these three men have largely determined politics in the state for the past 10 years. This time around, it was Lal versus Lal versus Lal—a three-way fight even though two Lals are fellow Congress-men. This fact, together with the stalemate in Punjab, was used to full advantage by the wily and vengeful Devi Lal to crush his erstwhile protégés.

It isn't surprising that Punjab was at the top of Devi Lal's campaign, together with a vow to forgive all farm debt up to Rs. 20,000 (about \$1,600) and a promise to approve all claims for pension benefits. Far more than the recent scandals in Delhi, the issue in Haryana is land and water—and that means *Punjab*. The two states have been at loggerheads over distribution of river waters and exchange of territory since they were partitioned in 1966, in the wake of a successful campaign by the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, to establish Punjab as a

separate Punjabi-speaking Sikh-majority state. Haryana, earlier a part of Punjab, became a Hindu-majority state in the process.

As the terrorist Khalistan movement mushroomed out of control during the 1980s, this fight took on a menacing communal undertone. Blaming the Congress (I) for propitiating the Sikhs became a staple in Haryana.

Just a month before the elections, Punjab was put under President's Rule again, removing the elected government headed by Surjit Singh Barnala, an aide of slain Akali leader Sant Longowal. Persisting factional fighting among the Akalis had compromised the Barnala government's ability to act against the terrorists. The action was widely viewed, however, as a Congress (I) election move to counter the Lok Dal charge that the Congress (I) is "soft" on Punjab.

The last-minute award of additional water to Haryana by the government commission charged with finding a solution to the river waters dispute, also fell flat.

The Punjab accord was unacceptable, Chief Minister Devi Lal said, because it was reached with only one faction of the Akali Dal. Devi Lal recalled that it had been possible to reach understandings in the 1970s when the Akali Dal was led by Parkash Singh Badal and G.S. Tohra.

Indeed, it is the Badal-Tohra combine that has been playing a dirty game in Punjab, for the past two years at least, to sabotage the accord, and in particular, to overthrow the elected Barnala government. Their opportunism and inflammatory rhetoric is a matter of record; their active collaboration with the pro-Khalistani terrorists has been widely suspected.

Devi Lal also announced that he will make independent arrangements with Punjab once a new popular government is elected there.