

# Changing dimensions in Indian politics

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The chaotic 11-month rule by the V.P. Singh-led Janata Dal government has given over to another interim arrangement. How long this will last is unknown; general elections may be around the corner. During the past 43 years of post-independence India, the country has enjoyed a stable democratic setup in New Delhi, for the most part. In the first 37 years, three prime ministers died in office, and two of them together had reigned for 33 years. Except for a brief interregnum of two years in the later half of the 1970s, one party, the Congress, was in power for 40 years.

Since independence, the Indian electorate has undertaken two experiments, both of which ended in chaos. The first took place in 1977, when the Janata Party, built around a platform of opposition to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi during the 1974-75 period of emergency rule, was given a hearty mandate. The promise fizzled out quickly, and Gandhi's Congress Party came back to power in 1980, on a wave of disenchantment with the failed regime.

The second experiment took place last year, when a band of disparate forces, cobbled together under the banner of the National Front, received a divided mandate from the electorate, and assumed power through further "cobbling." That experiment has now failed.

The second experiment would most likely have occurred sooner, had not Mrs. Gandhi been assassinated in 1984, an election year. Rajiv Gandhi led the Congress (I) to a resounding victory two months after his mother's murder. The stranglehold that the Congress Party had over the Indian electorate had already begun to loosen 15 years before, but the Janata Party's failure gave it a new lease on life.

More telling of the problems facing the Indian electorate is the second experiment, the Janata Dal. Led by a number of former Congress Party leaders disgruntled with the party leadership over the years, the coalition also included chauvinist regional parties and parties of both the "right" and "left." The electorate, particularly in north India, accepted all these contradictions and rejected the stable Rajiv Gandhi government. Even now, although people became angry and frustrated over the 11-month mis-rule of the V.P. Singh government, it is not unlikely that new experiments will emerge.

## Failures of the Congress ideology

Behind the changing political dynamics are the changing scene in rural India, where 80% of Indians live, and the institutional weaknesses of the Congress Party. As party president Rajiv Gandhi pointed out in an acerbic speech delivered in December 1985, the party has been handed over to the powerbrokers and barons who are using their positions to line their pockets and influence events to their petty advantage.

At the same time, rural India has changed. A great deal of economic activity in and around rural centers is now a reality. A large number of farmers are now turning into prosperous agro-industrialists. Rural India is no more only a producer, but also is consuming more. It is no more as dependent upon urban India for intellectual inputs as it once was.

The ideas emerging from rural India are not compatible with Congress Party litany. For instance, it is a fact that Hindus and Muslims lived together for centuries in reasonable harmony and peace long before Jawaharlal Nehru's brand of secularism—an alien concept drawn from the British Fabians, with a generous sprinkling of Marxism and Leninism—became "the way" for communal and religious harmony. This brand of secularism has not been welcomed in rural India, because it was Nehru—who was fond of describing himself as a pagan—who, with other Congress leaders, had bowed to the British demand for the partition of India, thereby accepting the communal concept that India is "one country with two nations." Nehru's violent reaction to any pro-Hindu views, which he dubbed Hindu fundamentalism and the primary threat to modern democratic India, was always looked at skeptically by most, along the Ganga Valley in particular. Rural India has also differed sharply from the borrowed socialism promoted by almost all Indian politicians, including the non-Congress varieties.

Rural India has not yet succeeded in giving its ideas a concrete shape, in the form of a national party and alternative national platform. In the meantime, dissension against alien social and political concepts has given rise to a gamut of localized parties, based on ethnicity, religion, and caste. All these parties have a limited base and are conflicting to each other in nature. It is the combination of these parties, with disgruntled Congressmen thrown in, that has produced the wild electoral alliances which were doomed to failure in the two Janata experiments. In the short term, these failures will most likely push the electorate back to the Congress Party for an interlude of stability.

In the present vacuum, without a national leadership emerging, this crisis could lead to disastrous results. Some small chauvinistic parties have emerged which are working toward fragmentation of society, creating a charged political atmosphere in many parts of the country. It is this charged situation that a section of the Hindu fanatics are now trying to exploit in Ayodhya. Similar tactics have been used by some Akalis in Punjab and Muslim fundamentalists in Kashmir.