

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Resurgent Rajiv

*The former prime minister steps out to score the V.P. Singh government's lack of policy and vision for India.*

In several candid and wide-ranging interviews over the past month, Rajiv Gandhi, head of India's largest party, the Congress (I), and now leader of the opposition, launched his campaign to regain the prime ministership.

Coming ten months after the Congress (I) was routed in general elections that brought the minority Janata Dal government to power, the interviews show the process of reflection and reassessment Gandhi himself and the Congress leadership has been undergoing.

The move is timely. With the end of the monsoon session of Parliament, the political scene has become, as even Prime Minister V.P. Singh admits, highly "fluid." The states of Kashmir, Punjab, and Assam are in flames, and the government faces a potentially mortal crisis in late October around the Ram Janambhoomi dispute, where militant Hindus vow to construct a temple at a site they claim is Lord Ram's birthplace, where a mosque is presently standing. Moreover, a recent poll confirmed that V.P. Singh's government's credibility had already been seriously eroded. If an election were held tomorrow, MARG pollsters found, and the National Front coalition splinters as it now shows signs of doing, the Congress (I) is assured of some 280 seats, a clear majority.

Rajiv Gandhi's interviews show he is ready. If he is refreshingly frank on past mistakes, he also hammers away with a new depth and confidence on his convictions of policy and principle—in a word, his vision for India's future—and it makes a striking

contrast to the drift and gimmickry of the past eight months.

Take economic policy, and the present government's multibillion-dollar farm loan waiver that passes as a pro-agriculture move. Says Gandhi: "The farm sector does not need larger and larger subsidies. It needs help to really become one of the best agricultural sectors in the world. We are sure of it—Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, coastal Andhra, parts of other southern states are as good as anywhere else in the world. Not because they get subsidies, but because they get extension, they get know-how, they were helped in many ways, but primarily in infrastructure.

"So you have to look at the agricultural sector in a new light. The most important is infrastructure: roads, water, energy, and, I will add, telecom. . . . We have to create more jobs in the rural areas. I want to create jobs, but not in fields. We must look at the industry-agriculture linkage in a new way. Traditionally that means tractors, implements, tools, pumps, the industrial input in agriculture. That of course will grow. But we must open the other link. Which is the downstream link—processing agriculture produce. Giving jobs in the rural areas. This will also reduce waste in agriculture."

Gandhi repeatedly spurned the simplistic labels that have forever muddled Indian policy discourse: "What is right and what is left?" he asked. "Is Gorbachov right? Or is he left? . . . You have to define things slightly differently."

Or on privatization and national-

ization: "So privatization is not the answer. The British got us into the mess of nationalization. Don't let them get us into the mess of privatization. . . . The problem is good and bad management."

But what really bothers Rajiv Gandhi is summed up in his charge that V.P. Singh has no vision for India in the world. "What is worrying is that this is a critical period for India," he says. "A critical period for all developing countries, but more so for India, because of our special position. What's worrying is that India is not playing a role that it must play. It's a responsibility that we have not only to our own people, but to all developing nations."

Gandhi questions whether the bipolar world is really becoming a multi-polar world. There are new "game players," he acknowledges, referring to Germany and Japan. "But are they game players that are going to play an independent game, or are they going to be part of one team?"

"What I see as a dangerous portent that must be guarded against—and that's why India must play a role—is that instead of going towards a more democratic international relationship, we are heading for a more dominating group in the international community. . . . That could mean much higher exploitation of the developing countries."

There is a specific danger Gandhi sees in the shifting world geometry. "The biggest danger is that the U.S. heads for some sort of economic problem. . . . Germany and Japan were the two countries that were really investing in the U.S.A. If Japan also cuts out . . . becoming a real player in the world economic scene, then the U.S. is going to head for problems, economic problems. And that is where tensions may start which can give the whole world problems."