

The Bloody Aftermath

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No. 44 (Nov. 3, 1984), pp. 1850-1851

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4373704>

Accessed: 17-11-2023 01:41 +00:00

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community are identified. Three comments are possible and relevant in this connection. First, insofar as the events in Punjab are directly linked to her murder, can the responsibility for the way these events have turned out be placed anywhere away from the Congress(I) party's, and Indira Gandhi's, own decisions and non-decisions? She was wont to make a small point time and again during recent months: the Akalis did not make a squeak during the interregnum of the Janata regime at the Centre during 1977-79; they started raising their 'extremist' demands only after she returned to power in 1980. She could not have been more right. She did not, however, stop to investigate the factors underlying this change in Akali attitude, or, if she did, felt it prudent to keep the result of her investigations to herself. During the Janata spell, the Akalis did not pitch their demands in extravagant terms simply because they did not feel the objective need to do so, nor was there any external circumstance pushing them towards such a denouement. The fact that things changed with Indira Gandhi's assumption of office as Prime Minister was on account of Indira Gandhi herself. She and her younger son had encouraged the Bhindranwale phenomenon in Punjab merely to get even with the Akalis who had turned against her during the Emergency and its aftermath. They had to be punished for their perfidy; the punishment was Bhindranwale, who was egged on to be as unreasonable as he could be, and, in the process, make life increasingly more impossible for the Akalis. The facts, after all, are on record: till as late as the last week of April of this year, Rajiv Gandhi, who has now assumed the mantle of Prime Minister, was himself ambivalent in his attitude towards Bhindranwale, whom he described as only a spiritual leader not interested in politics. It was intense competition; the Akalis too, for sheer survival, had to match their demands with Bhindranwale's. It is equally necessary to mention another fact. Had Indira Gandhi straightaway accepted the formula the opposition parties, with the consent of the Akali leaders, had broached to her for resolving the tangle, a kind of peace could have been brought back to Punjab in 1983 itself. But she hesitated, her partisan interests stood in the way. It is only after the Golden Temple had been wrested from the control of the extremists that she changed her stance and announced the acceptance of the core of the formula; it was then too late. And in any case the foremost Akali leaders were held in detention by her government under the National Security Act.

In the second place, is it not fair to lay the blame for her murder on the morning of October 31 exclusively at the door of those who were closest to her? It is a commonplace that if fanatics are around, not even the strictest measure of security can save an individual from sudden annihilation. But it should have been the responsibility of those closest to her to ensure that such fanatics do not come into her proximity. They failed in this elementary task. Several rounds of screening must have taken place on each occasion before her personal

bodyguards were selected, and shuffled. Obviously, these screenings were grievously lacking in perfection. Indira Gandhi's chosen ones have to be condemned for this abject failure, for which the nation as a whole has now to pay dearly.

Now to the third point. The abandon with which elements in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and in some of the other outlying states have struck at the Sikh community and generally engaged in a spree of rampant arson, loot and murder suggests connivance of large sections of the police and the constabulary. And this connivance at the lower and middle rungs of the administration is accompanied by a total atrophy of thought and decision-making, if not sheer incompetence, on the part of those who constitute what passes for the leadership in the government at the Centre and the Congress(I) party. It also surely indicates that the base of her following has not, in the course of the past two decades, at all advanced away from superstition and bigotry towards the direction of secular reasoning. In the capital and in several other towns and cities last week, the first group of rioters had flourished Congress(I) flags even as they went on rampage. In many areas, the police actively helped the acts of arson and looting. The spirit of blind revenge coalesced with the lure of brigandage, and vast stretches of the country gave the impression of a community slaughter house set aside for the human species.

Is not all this of a piece? Indira Gandhi talked of space research and of the scientific temper, but, in the same breath, she encouraged superstition, just as much as she encouraged mediaeval codes and beliefs. There was that fatal flaw which affected her judgment and decisions, and which, in turn, moulded the mind and action of millions of her countrymen who blindly followed and voted for her. She was a great one for temple-hopping, for faith-healing, for astrology. Or perhaps this was no flaw, but a necessary accessory for her strategy to monopolise power for herself and her family. Feed the people with mythology, let rituals and taboos define the lives of men and women and their decision-making. There was a certain contempt she nurtured within herself for the people of India; there was also a reservoir of hauteur earmarked for the claque of politicians; it is only the Nehrus who are capable of ruling India. If you want to be around in the administration, if you want to be inducted into the hierarchy of power, you must abide by the judgment of the Nehrus, you must pay appropriate obeisance to them. Those who found themselves unable to go along with this attitude of mind were squeezed out from the party as much as the government. It is only those who believed in mythology and religiosity—or pretended to believe—who could also accept the principle of dynastic succession. This crowd of sycophants will be natural bigots. They will strip themselves of rationality, they will be lacking in competence, they will be unable to put down riots and, in given cir-

cumstances, will abet the vile deeds of the rioters and other criminal elements.

One thus comes to the current state of the Congress(I) and the succession to which this party has agreed with alacrity. It is important to be strict with facts. While this was her left-over ambition, Indira Gandhi herself did not install her son as Prime Minister; that deed has been effected by her party, which was unable to discover a better alternative. The young man, who has been placed at the head of the government, has no experience in administration and has only a bare three-and-half years' grooming in political activity. In ordinary times, it would have been sheer irresponsibility to place the affairs of this complex, huge country in the hands of such a novice. The times now are very far from ordinary, but the Congress(I) party did not know what else it could do.

This therefore has to be the final commentary on Indira Gandhi's bequest. When she took charge two decades ago, she found a reasonably well-organised Congress party, with several layers of responsive leadership across the length and breadth of the country. She dismantled the party and she did so with a clear purposiveness. Because she did not trust anyone who would not play a subservient role to her and her family, she got rid of the intermediate leadership and re-built the party as a paper entity, without a democratic structure and with office-bearers personally selected and named by her. In the process, she alienated the political community as a whole, and in fact took malicious pleasure in exposing their follies and foibles. The outcome was inevitable. Today those with a reasonable span of administrative and political experience are nowhere near the proximity of power and responsibility in the Congress(I) party, and those who are placed in the administration in crucial positions are wanting in sagacity, competence and experience. The annihilation of a life is always a sad episode. But this fractured nation has now to fend for itself, and try to explore ways and means of extracting itself from the bondage of the inheritance of the past twenty years.

Politics

The Bloody Aftermath

MORE people, it is likely, have been killed in the orgy of communal violence directed against the Sikhs following Indira Gandhi's assassination than in two years of the conflict in Punjab, including in the army action. The killing and looting was worst in Delhi, but other towns such as Kanpur, Jabalpur, Calcutta, Patna, Jammu, Bokaro, Bhilai and Rourkela were not spared. The violence has by no means been brought under control at the time of going to press, but already in Delhi alone unofficial estimates put the death toll at nearly 1,000 with 50,000 Sikhs displaced from their homes and 20,000 seeking refuge in temporary relief camps. In one incident at Trilokpuri, near

Delhi, reportedly 300 persons were killed in a carnage that lasted several hours.

Newspaper accounts are virtually unanimous that the perpetrators of the violence were able to go about their work for hours without any hindrance. Residences, shops and factories owned by Sikhs were selectively burnt down. The police either came to the scene late or refused to react or respond to pleas for help. In Delhi the curfew did not at all seem to hinder the movement of the assailants. Mischief-mongers were able even to travel freely in vehicles with loudspeakers announcing that the city's water supply had been poisoned in an attempt to further raise passions against the Sikhs. The army which officially had been called in to restore order on November 1 was in fact nowhere to be seen till the next day.

While people of various political persuasions may have been involved in the rioting, the most prominent role was undoubtedly played by Congress(I) men, which also accounted for the administration being rendered ineffective. The newly-appointed Prime Minister, while he made general exhortations to maintain communal harmony, did not in either of his two broadcasts to the nation make a categorical statement that for the assassination of Indira Gandhi by two Sikh members of her own security guard the Sikh community could in no way be held responsible. The Union Home Secretary, on the other hand, seemed almost to be playing down the violence against the Sikhs when, according to newspaper reports, he said that the assassination of Indira Gandhi "was bound to agitate the people" and suggested that the violence was "the expression of their grief", albeit by a "lunatic fringe" of the Hindu community.

The anti-Sikh riots have also to be seen against the background of the progressive rise of religious chauvinism among a section of Hindus. As the Union Home Minister himself had remarked on October 20, there has been a marked increase in the fervour with which religious festivals have been celebrated. Other manifestations of this trend have been the countrywide march for the unity of the Hindus last winter, the agitation for 'liberation' of Hindu temples and the emergence of several rabidly chauvinistic Hindu groups. These Hindu communal groups and their demands have been accorded respectability when their delegations have been permitted to meet members of the government with their petitions. A member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad even found a place in an official delegation sent to Mauritius in October.

The Succession

A Private Matter

THE very mode of transfer of Prime Ministership to Rajiv Gandhi within hours of Indira Gandhi's assassination has served to indicate

the extent to which the exercise of parliamentary power had become centralised under Indira Gandhi's rule and the Congress(I), in whose name the governance of the country is carried on, has been rendered superfluous. The hurried swearing in of the new Prime Minister was a decisive manoeuvre by the small band of politicians and key bureaucrats loyal to the Nehru household.

Just a week ago the weaknesses of the Congress(I) were glaringly evident. The internal squabbles had virtually crippled the Congress(I) administration in several states including the electorally vital Hindi states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. And with the parliamentary poll expected in the coming months, tensions over distribution of seats had gripped the Congress(I) MPs, even leading to the expulsion of 'loyalists' like J B Dhote and F M Khan.

Rajiv Gandhi, though the second in command after Indira Gandhi, had yet to prove his administrative competence. More importantly, in the present context, he did not seem to have a close enough understanding of other leaders in his own party, let alone a grasp of the prevailing political culture. Also, several young political non-entities, who are in the Lok Sabha today because they had been hand-picked by the late Sanjay Gandhi in 1980, were known to be unhappy over being ignored by Rajiv Gandhi and his set of advisors.

Given the above situation there might have been an element of risk involved in waiting upon the Congress(I) parliamentary party's prior approval of Rajiv Gandhi as the new Prime Minister. This is not to say that Rajiv Gandhi, in the present circumstances, does not enjoy the backing of the Congress(I) parliamentary party. Indeed on November 2 the parliamentary party did unanimously ratify his choice. It is probably not surprising that even Congress(I) leaders and MPs who might have had reservations about Rajiv Gandhi's ascension to power did not wish to be seen as opposing him at this juncture. These dissidents obviously had to reckon with the massive sympathy aroused by the manner of Indira Gandhi's demise and would not want to risk their political future by going against this sentiment.

Bangladesh

Ershad under Pressure

BY postponing the elections to Parliament the martial law regime in Bangladesh has bowed to popular pressure. The military regime has had to retreat on several other issues as well as in recent months.

First, it had to concede in June the opposition demand that elections to Parliament be held before the Presidential election. Later, in July it had to agree to broadcast news of op-

position rallies. In August, the military regime disbanded military courts, which had been a part of the opposition's demand for return to civilian rule. And in October, the Ershad government announced that martial law would be relaxed in fortnightly phases through withdrawal of military administrators from the various administrative tiers, beginning with the removal of the district martial law administrators, followed by that of zonal military law administration and finally the abolition of the deputy martial law administrators and restoration of the fundamental rights and the writ jurisdiction of the high courts by November 30. Ershad, however, rejected the demand—raised by all the three opposition fronts—for the complete withdrawal of the martial law before the elections to Parliament. He also warned that unless the opposition fronts withdrew their agitation, he would actually reinforce martial law.

One factor which may have weighed with the regime in conceding these demands is the poor popular response that the Janadal, the political party that Ershad has sought to prop up, has evoked. Worse, Janadal remains divided and Ershad has had to intervene repeatedly to keep the factional balance within the party. In September, for instance, there were serious differences over the formation of an 11-member supreme council and the move to reorganise the leadership of various front organisations and local level party units. These differences are inevitable considering that the Janadal consists mostly of defectors from other parties and groups. Each of the factions is anxious to secure adequate representation for itself in the party's leadership structure. Not surprisingly, the factional tussles have erupted into physical violence. Most recently, in Sylhet at the end of October a meeting to be addressed by the Janadal's secretary-general had to be called off because of fighting among the different factions.

The demonstrations and bandhs organised by the 15-party and 7-party opposition fronts have evoked mass response from the people. They have been able to sustain the momentum of the agitation against the martial law regime despite internal dissensions and military repression. They have also been able to work together despite their differences on several key issues. The opposition campaign recently got a boost from the statement of the former president Abdus Sattar at a BNP public meeting that he had been removed from office "at gun point". In addition, several former members of the armed forces have been publicly assailing the regime, among them M H Khan who had served as deputy martial law administrator under Zia-ur-Rahman.

The Ershad government's handling of the situation created by the widespread floods which has affected 403 out of 460 upazillas and damaged paddy and raw jute, especially the routing of the relief supplies through Janadal