

A Second Innings For Indira Gandhi

By M. R. MASANI

I HAVE always considered Mrs Indira Gandhi to be a lucky person. Her luck is holding out. Even if she had been invited to choose three suicidal maniacs to succeed her in 1977, she could not have done better for herself than she has.

One of these men, Mr Jagjivan Ram, has described Mrs Gandhi's victory as "magic or a miracle". Nothing of the kind. Anyone could foresee what was coming, though not the exaggerated swing of the pendulum caused by the archaic electoral system we have adopted from Britain.

With 42.58 per cent of the votes cast, the Congress (I) has bagged 66.85 per cent of the seats in the new Lok Sabha. This is a caricature of the mind of the electorate. It deprives the country of a strong parliamentary Opposition. It may also mislead the new Government who may forget the silent majority in the country who are not with them.

What were the issues on which the election was fought? It was clear from the start that it was not the issue of Democracy versus Authoritarianism. In an article in the *Daily Telegraph* of London on September 24, 1979, I had warned: "The issue in the coming election will not be democracy versus autocracy; it will be the record of the Janata Government and, above all, the level of prices".

Those of Mrs Gandhi's opponents who posed the issue of Democracy or Authoritarianism made an egregious blunder. Indeed, an acceptance of their thesis would mean that 42% of the electorate have voted for autocracy. What people have voted for is the restoration of law and order and some discipline—but within the limits of the Constitution.

You cannot fight something with nothing. Mrs Gandhi's opponents have not begun to understand this. Their "Indira Hatao" slogan in 1971 and their recent "Stop Indira" campaign were counterproductive. One had only to look at her two rivals for the Prime Ministership, with their miserable record of the past three years, to realize that the battle was over before it was joined.

There is a real threat to democracy in India, but it comes primarily not from any particular individual but from the years and years of misgovernment and the failure to deal with the country's problems since the achievement of Independence. It is the failure of the politicians who have worked the democratic process that has created a vacuum which Mrs Gandhi has been astute enough to fill. This is one more example of Walter Lippman's proposition in his little book *The Public Philosophy* that, faced with the choice between an incompetent and inept parliamentary régime and authority which promises to be paternal (or maternal, as in this case), people will choose the latter.

Mrs Gandhi is again at the wicket for her second innings. Will she this time play the game according to the rules? Will she turn out to be a patriot or statesman of the stature of de Gaulle who served his country so

well or will she again be influenced by bad advice?

Though conscious of the dangers her advent poses, especially her continuing pro-Soviet bias, I for one—though I had opposed her censorship and other measures during the Emergency—would not like to join anyone in the old game: "Give a dog a bad name and hang him". The people of India have given their verdict and it would be both unsporting and undemocratic to claim superior wisdom and denounce the verdict. There is an obligation on the part of the good citizen to respond to her appeal for cooperation.

The new Prime Minister takes over at a difficult time. Hers will not be a bed of roses. She will be judged by the way she attends to her primary tasks. The first is to restore order and discipline and security for life, person and property. This can be done without dictatorship. Neither the students who assault a Vice-Chancellor nor the trade union leader who leads an illegal strike or a go-slow is immune from conviction for a crime under the law of the land and a term in prison. But the law has not been enforced. The new Prime Minister's first task is to enforce the law and restore discipline without dictatorship.

Linked to this, as she has herself mentioned, is the economic problem. Here pragmatic policies, free of dogma and populism, are needed.

Mrs Gandhi possesses great courage. When in Parliament I had described her as "the only man in her party". Will she have the courage to tell the people the harsh truth that you cannot distribute or consume what you do not produce? In other words, that incentives to higher production, namely reduced taxation and de-control, should be high on the agenda? Mrs Margaret Thatcher, that other Iron Lady, has been doing this and Sri Lanka shows us the way. As President Jayawardene said the other day: "Yesterday, Sri Lanka; today India".

I feel I would be justified in revealing a conversation I had with my good friend Jayaprakash because he struck a note which may provide guidance to us. It was on October 11, 1978, when I was in Patna to be with him on his birthday. Already I could vaguely divine the shape of things to come, and I thought I should prepare J.P. for what might be a blow to him.

"If you live long enough, J.P." I told him, "you might live to see Indira Gandhi elected Prime Minister by the vote of the people. I hope you will not take this to heart. It will not be your defeat, but that of those you have placed in authority in Delhi".

J.P. answered: "Why should I feel upset if that happens, Minoo? I have nothing personal against Indira. If the people elect her, I shall cheerfully accept the verdict". Then, after a slight pause, he added: "But will she obey the Constitution?"

While the answer to that \$64,000 question unfolds in the coming months, let us all keep our fingers crossed.

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