

(To be published in The Observer)

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With political arrests running into ^{several} thousand

What ^{is} ~~was~~ significant in the recent crisis ^{is} ~~was~~ not the ^{deceptive} ~~apparent~~ o

Like the 'broad-bottom' Whig oligarchy of Walpole's England, the Indian
was

Both in programme and composition, the non-Communist Opposition had little

emphasis - the Hindu revivalism of the Jan Sangh, the ~~national~~ ^{economic} nationalism of various
onomics of the Swatantra Party and the provincial ^{or} ~~national~~ ^{through dilated} nationalism of various

with middle class parties - the C.P.I. with Mrs. Gandhi's Congress and the C.P.I. (M) with ^{J.P.} Jayaprakash Narayan's Popular Front.

After the poor performance of non-Congress coalition governments in the States, it was not difficult for Mrs. Gandhi to rout her discredited opponents in the general election of 1971 and the State elections of 1972. India seemed set for another long period of one-party dominance. That this familiar balance of power was shaken so dramatically within three years was due to an unexpected convergence of three factors: the economic crisis which followed the Bangladesh war, a creeping paralysis within the ruling party, and the popular crusade against corruption led by J.P. ~~and others~~.

Galloping inflation and economic scarcity, coming in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's promise to eradicate poverty, created a popular groundswell of discontent. The Congress proved singularly incapable of coping with the crisis. Its 'broad-bottom' character had inhibited the growth of opposition outside, but this had been at the cost of internalising ~~opposition~~ ^{pluralistic} it. Opposition, in this wider sense of ^{pluralistic} resistance to centralised planning and reform, expressed itself in the internal feuds of rival factions and pressure groups within Congress. In normal times, traditional Congress methods of political management might have been adequate to contain inner-party factionalism within tolerable limits. But the effect of the economic crisis, instead of closing Congress ranks, was to ~~not~~ stimulate fissiparous tendencies in the party. The result was unprecedented internal conflict and administrative ^{confusion} ~~corruption~~ at the very moment when the economic situation called for dynamic and determined action.

That an equally discredited Opposition was able to capitalise on the failures of the Congress was largely due to J.P., whose 18-year ~~long~~ voluntary retirement from politics, endowed his sudden return with a Messianic aura. It is a measure of the importance of charismatic leadership in India that ~~the~~ the 'J.P. wave' proved as effective in ^{mobilising} ~~organising~~ and articulating latent opposition as the 'Indira wave' had been in winning the Congress a popular mandate in 1971. Parties as disparate as the right-wing Jan Sangh and the Left Communists crowded beneath the non-party, Gandhian umbrella of this second Mahatma. J.P.'s ~~own~~ status as the last of India's veteran nationalist leaders gave the Opposition what it had lacked since Independence - political legitimacy. As a leader above party, and almost above politics, J.P. also won the sympathy of large sections of the ruling Congress, includ-

ing senior leaders who had been biding their time to challenge Mrs. Gandhi's supremacy. This unprecedented convergence of ^{the} opposition within and the opposition outside under a single, charismatic leader, threatened the Congress with a split more serious than that of 1969.

Had she read the signs in time, Mrs. Gandhi might have met the challenge within the parliamentary framework, relying on her considerable political skills to divide her opponents as effectively as she had in 1969. J.P. himself was not irrevocably committed to the Opposition and had indicated more than once his willingness to join Mrs. Gandhi in a duumvirate similar to that of Gandhi and Nehru before Independence. Had she been willing to break with conservative elements in her own party, she could also have driven a wedge between the Opposition parties, winning over the C.P.I. (M) and the Socialists, who had supported her during the Congress split, on the basis of a radical programme. This might have meant sharing power in a collective leadership but it would have ensured her long-term survival as a popular and democratic Prime Minister. Over-confident after her electoral and military victories, Mrs. Gandhi ^{she} chose instead to go it alone. Faced with the consequences of her complacency, she is now engaged in a last-ditch attempt to survive by coercion.

Can she succeed, and for how long? Learning from the mistakes of the British, she has done what the Raj omitted to do in August 1942. She has arrested not only her leading opponents but all potential substitutes and activists, from the national to the district level, on whom she could lay her hands. She has thereby pre-empted an immediate uprising. But although she has retarded opposition and driven it underground, she has not eradicated it.

Mrs. Gandhi's leading opponent, J.P., has been on a hunger strike which may well prove fatal. But in a highly sentimental country, J.P.'s death in captivity would be far less damaging to the Opposition than to Mrs. Gandhi, whose moral authority it would seriously undermine. The States of Gujarat and ~~Andhra Pradesh~~ ^{many} ~~large numbers~~ of Opposition activists are believed to have escaped underground, and it is only a matter of time before they re-group and reorganise. The States of Gujarat and Tamilnad, which have ^{anti} ~~non~~-Congress governments, and Bihar, J.P.'s home territory, will provide them with a fertile base for their operations. The C.P.I. (M) leadership, who have escaped arrest so far, remain implacably hostile to Mrs. Gandhi, while the C.P.I., hitherto her staunch ally, is believed to be having second thoughts. Even if the Opposition parties prove too fragile to withstand the present crack-down, the interests they represent are equally present in Mrs. Gandhi's

own faction-ridden Congress and in the military-bureaucratic complex on which she must increasingly rely.

Indira Gandhi is not the leader of a revolution or even of a coup d'etat. After nine years as Prime Minister and four years of unchallenged supremacy, she can hardly claim to be a new broom sweeping clean. To demonstrate that she aims at more than personal survival, she has announced an attractive package of reforms. But her radical proposals, however laudable, are a familiar re-hash of the promises she made during the Congress split. And in the absence of ^{committed} ~~new~~ mass cadres and ^{new} ~~instruments~~ of change, they are likely to meet with the same fate. It is almost a 'Catch 22' situation. To retain the ~~xxxxxx~~ obedience of the Congress Party, the bureaucracy and the security forces, Mrs. Gandhi ~~xxxxx~~ must retrieve ~~her~~ mass popularity and show quick results. But any genuine attempt at reform will be resisted from within by the same middle class groups which have stalled reform in the past and continue to dominate the Congress, the military and the bureaucracy. So long as Indira Gandhi works through the same party and bureaucracy - and she has little choice - she will remain a prisoner of this dilemma.

As a seasoned politician, Mrs. Gandhi ^{must} ~~knows only too well~~ that her people have a particular genius for passive resistance. It is a national characteristic, ~~xx~~ when faced with an unpleasant demand, to say yes and quietly non-cooperate. The amoeba of opposition is too deeply rooted in India's pluralistic society to be purged from above. Driven underground, it may change shape, alternating between slow erosion and sudden eruption. But it will continue to proliferate, gnawing at the vitals of Indira Gandhi's political system and sapping her leadership of such strength as it retains.
