

5902

New York HERALD TRIBUNE

Sunday, October 20, 1963

NEHRU'S DAUGHTER MAY INHERIT, WITH MENON UNECLIPSED

By Arnold Beichman
A Special Correspondent

Highly placed sources in India are today persuaded that Prime Minister-Jawaharlal Nehru, who will be 74 years next month, has decided on his successor - Mrs. Indira Nehru Gandhi, his handsome, middle-aged daughter.

According to unusually well-informed persons in India, should Mr. Nehru's tentative decision prevail, its fundamental reason would be to ensure that V.K. Krishna Menon's influence on the country's domestic and foreign affairs will not lapse when Mr. Nehru steps down from the office he has held for 16 years. By arranging the transition during his own lifetime and by putting his daughter into his place, Mr. Nehru would be able to keep Menon the influential figure he still is even today as a private citizen.

This analysis may well be the key to understanding the Indian Cabinet shakeup late in August when six ministers, three of whom might have been contenders for Nehru's mantle, were ousted. The three men - Morarji Desai, Lak Bahadur Shastri and S.K. Patil, were regarded as conservatives and hostile to Mr. Nehru's professed socialist aims, particularly in land reform.

Mr. Nehru has never publicly indicated his choice of successor, although at one time it was taken for granted that he favored Mr. Menon above all others for reasons veiled in obscurity. One theory among knowledgeable Indians is that Mr. Menon has persuaded the Prime Minister that only the Soviet Union can save India from Chinese aggression and that only Mr. Menon himself has the ear of Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

MENON UNACCEPTABLE

Whatever the reason for the relationship between the two men, one which extends over four decades, Mr. Nehru today realizes, it is said, that Mr. Menon could never be accepted by the Congress party for any government post, let alone that of Prime Minister.

For a few months after the Indian seizure of Portuguese Goa in 1962, Menon, then Defense Minister, enjoyed something rare in his long career as an Indian statesman - national popularity. That euphoric mood vanished overnight with Communist China's successful military invasion of India's northwest and northeast provinces in Oct.-Nov. 1962.

Revealed as naked fact was that India's armed forces were tragically unprepared for real combat. The bloody reverses suffered by the Indian army led to a deafening public outcry against Menon, who had been Defense Minister for five years. On Nov. 1, 1962, he was demoted to a newly-created post - Minister of Defense Production. But public clamor would not be stilled, and so a week later, to loud cheers in the Congress Parliamentary party, Nehru announced Mr. Menon's dismissal from even this secondary post.

In some ways, his apparent disappearance from public life may have been the best thing which ever happened to Mr. Menon. Instead of having to account for his ministerial acts to a hostile Parliament and public opinion, he has been able to maintain the same, if not closer, relationship with Mr. Nehru.

For example, last July, Mr. Nehru approved an agreement permitting the Voice of America to install a powerful medium-wave transmitter in Calcutta to be shared by the U.S. and Indian governments. Mr. Menon reportedly shot off an angry letter to Mr. Nehru accusing him of going back on India's non-

71 NOV 1963

alignment policy and followed it up with a face-to-face attack at Mr. Nehru's home on the morning of the day of the scheduled Cabinet meeting.

BUT HIS VIEWS PREVAIL

Later, Mr. Nehru told his Cabinet colleagues that he had misunderstood the implications of the VOA agreement, apologized for his error and announced the agreement's abrogation.

One of India's leading personalities and one who sees Mr. Nehru often enough to claim his friendship is the source of a report that relations between the Indian Prime Minister and Mr. Menon, whom the opposition has long regarded as a "crypto-Communist," have never been closer.

"Nehru is absolutely unreconciled," this informant has said, "to the fact that Menon is out of the Cabinet. They meet every day and night at his home to discuss politics. Nehru listens to Menon just at his home as he has for all these years."

Mrs. Gandhi, a 46-year-old widow and mother of two young boys, has been in politics since her early teens. Educated at Oxford's Somerville College, she joined her father in the struggle for independence from Britain and even served a 13-month jail sentence for her activities. A former president of the ruling All-India National Congress, she has been active in virtually every phase of Indian public life and has acted as her widowed father's official hostess.

The relationship between the chic, ever well-groomed Mrs. Gandhi (her late husband was an Indian journalist and parliamentarian but unrelated to the Mahatma) and Mr. Menon now 66, is long-standing. She and her future husband came under Menon's influence when they were in England. Upon their return to India in the late 30s, she joined the All-India Students Federation, then an open Communist front, instead of the All-Indian Students Congress with its national and socialist orientation. Some Indians say that Mr. Menon is Mrs. Gandhi's "guru" or teacher. Less euphemistic is a characterization by others who say that he is Mrs. Gandhi's Rasputin.

Publicly Mrs. Gandhi has defended Mr. Menon from attack. On Nov. 8, 1961, she spoke before the Women's National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Asked to "explain" Mr. Menon she said three things:

1. "I don't think he could explain himself."
2. "Of one thing I am sure; he is not a Communist. Sometimes the things he says can be used that way, but that does not make him a Communist."
3. He has "a very fine mind, and one which India needs."

The overriding question in India is whether Mr. Nehru, for all his vast prestige, will be able to impose his selection of a successor, particularly his own daughter. Much of what is reported here comes from men in his own government and party, who have said privately that should Mrs. Gandhi replace her father it would make Mr. Menon "de facto" Prime Minister. One thing is fairly certain - an attempt to install Mrs. Gandhi would split the country and the Congress party.

What is being asked in India today is whether Mr. Nehru will risk such a step at a critical moment in the country's history.