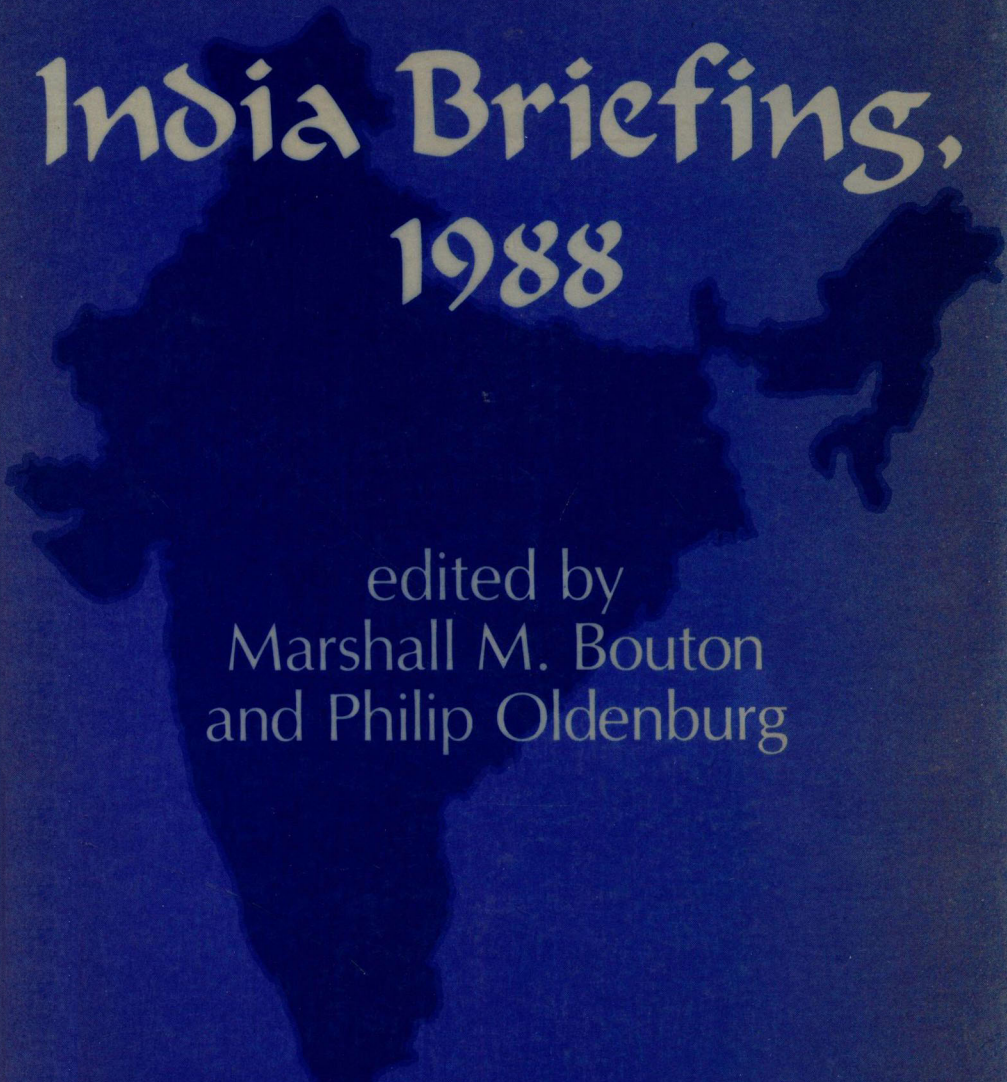
India Briefing, 1988



edited by
Marshall M. Bouton
and Philip Oldenburg

Published in cooperation with
The Asia Society

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India Briefing, 1988

Preface

While India continues to play key roles on the international stage, 1987 was a year of primarily domestic preoccupations in India. Severe drought and floods, combined with a sluggish economy, complicated the task of economic reform. Separatist terrorism and sectarian violence increased at home and among Tamil militants in Sri Lanka, where India sent troops to enforce a settlement of civil strife. Charges of corruption against members of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government, defections from his ruling Congress (I) party, and regional electoral defeats threatened the government's popularity and support. At the same time, there appeared to be little prospect of serious economic setback or political breakdown.

India Briefing 1988 is the second volume in a new series of annual assessments of key events and trends in Indian affairs. Encouraged by the reception of *India Briefing 1987*, The Asia Society and Westview Press decided to continue this effort to offer the general reader an overview of Indian politics, economy, and foreign relations in 1987, as well as in-depth examination of other important topics in Indian life. The special topics covered in 1988 are national security, science and technology, and education.

This year, Philip Oldenburg joins Marshall M. Bouton in the co-editorship of the series. Marshall Bouton and The Asia Society are deeply grateful to Professor Oldenburg for agreeing at a late date to help bring the volume to press and for consenting to be part of this venture in the future. We look forward to the collaboration.

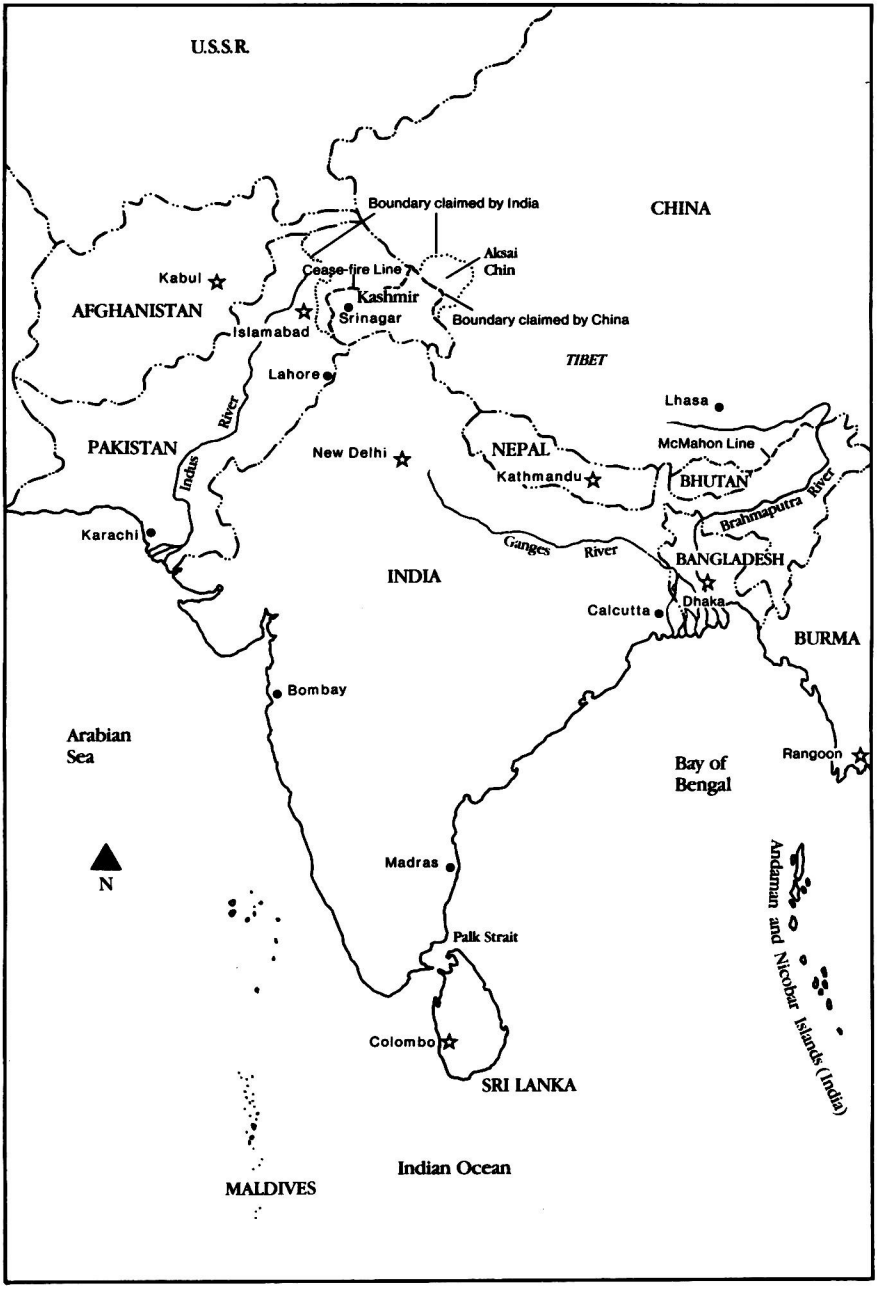
The editors wish to express great appreciation to the authors of *India Briefing 1988*. Their forebearance and cooperation under the extraordinary circumstances that surrounded the completion of the volume were exemplary. Their work is the heart of our effort. We are also grateful to Susan McEachern and her colleagues at Westview Press for their dedication to the enterprise and for their patience and understanding in completing this project.

Several individuals at The Asia Society helped make *India Briefing 1988* possible. Sarah Beckjord skillfully managed the final editorial and manuscript preparation tasks, despite being new to her job and to this project. Earlier Linda Griffin Kean provided valuable assistance. Donatella Lorch carried out important research assignments and prepared the chronology. Andrea Sokerka, Rose Wright, and Chip Gagnon were crucial to the manuscript preparation.

Marshall M. Bouton
The Asia Society

Philip Oldenburg
Columbia University

23 August 1988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MALDIVES

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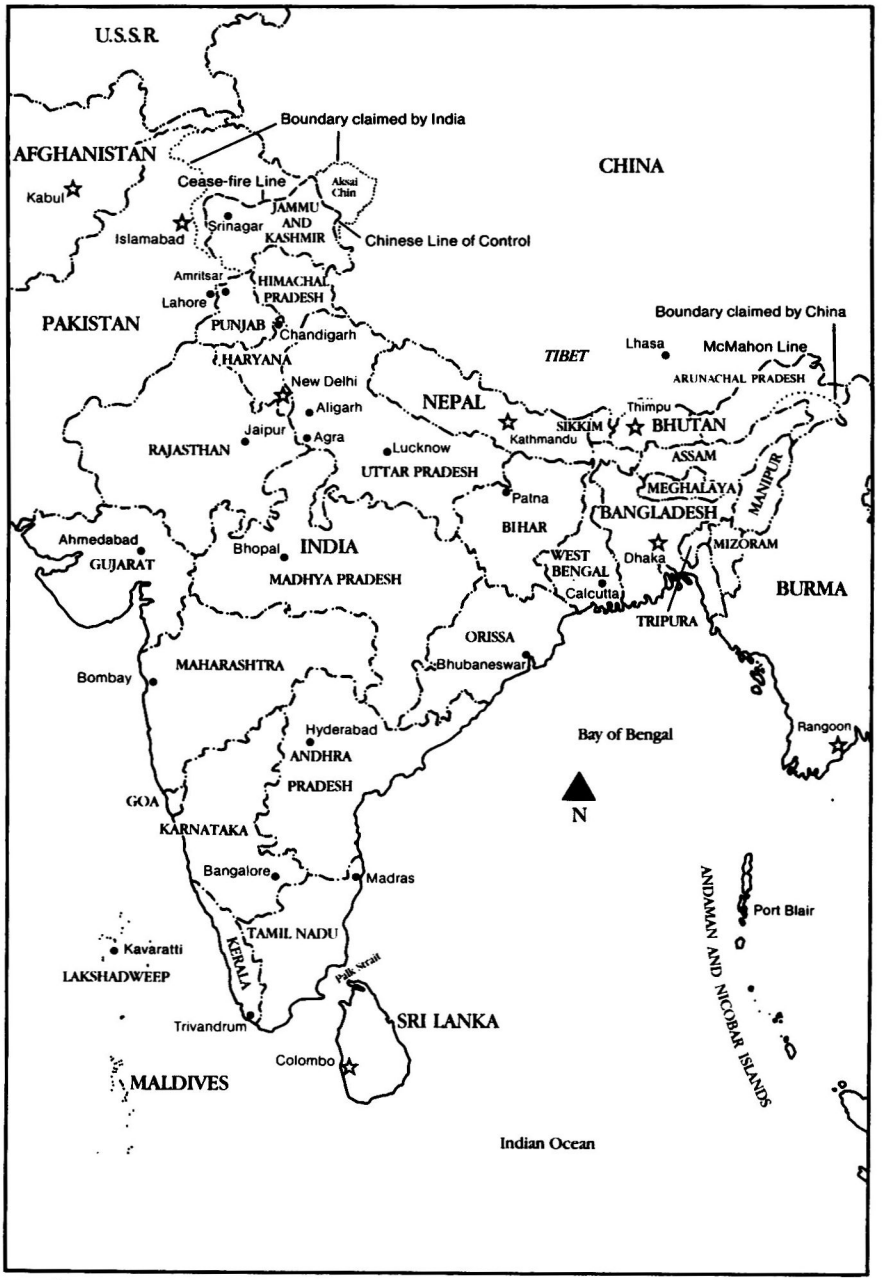
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Politics: Ambiguity, Disillusionment, and Ferment

James Manor

In 1987, India celebrated the completion of four decades of self-government. It was a year in which it was easier to see how important political leaders, forces, and initiatives had run into trouble than to discern how they and India's democracy might extricate themselves. It was, however, a year of ambiguity rather than of negativity and decline. There was plenty of political and social ferment, some of which led to destructive conflict and violence, but much of which appeared to have creative promise. It was a year of further disillusionment with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and of continuing doubts about the possibility of broad opposition unity. But India's political system ended 1987 no less open or stable than it began the year, despite the worst drought of the twentieth century, terrorist outrages, severe communal violence, statist overreactions, populist extravagance, the deaths of two major political leaders, electoral humiliation for the party in power in New Delhi, revelations of monumental corruption, and much more. That is no small achievement.

It became apparent during 1987 that Rajiv Gandhi had largely abandoned his efforts, undertaken in 1985, to rebuild formal political institutions which had suffered damage in preceding years such as the cabinet ministries, the bureaucracy, and the courts. He was more than ever at a loss as to how to rebuild his Congress party, which had once been India's most important political institution, but which has been in a wretched condition since the mid-1970s. It also became clear that his current five-year term as prime minister, which extends until the end of 1989, will be distinguished neither by a sustained liberalization of the economy nor by creative new state-led programs to promote development or social welfare. This means that he will be very short of programmatic achievements on which to base his reelection campaign in the next year. He will therefore have to depend on his own waning

appeal and the possibility of opposition disarray; and—since these may not suffice, given the maturity and impatience of India's mass electorate—upon huge political gambles that rarely produce spectacular achievements.

Problems that Did Not Arise

Before plunging into a discussion of India's political dilemmas, it is worth mentioning five problems which India did *not* face in 1987 and is unlikely to encounter soon, as a way of suggesting the scale of its political achievement over the last 40 years. First, India was not threatened by the prospect of a military coup. This owed a little to logistical factors. The size of the country and the structure of the armed forces, which prevents close contact between officers from different services until they reach senior ranks, make a coup difficult to coordinate. More important, the armed forces had enough confidence in civilian elites and in open politics that they were disinclined even to contemplate such action. They had also learned, by observing Pakistan and Bangladesh, the inadequacy of armies as instruments of government in complex societies.

Nor, despite much ill-formed comment to the contrary, was India about to fall apart. In part, the coercive power of the central government is more than sufficient to prevent regions or states within India from breaking away. But the threat of secession has never seriously arisen and is unlikely to do so—except perhaps in the remote, hilly states of the far northeast which are ethnically and culturally distinct. Elsewhere, in mainstream India, secessionist movements of substance (as opposed to secessionist rhetoric) are unlikely to arise because would-be secessionists cannot generate enough solidarity at the state or regional level to sustain such movements. Perhaps *the* most distinctive feature of Indian society is its extreme heterogeneity, the ubiquity of variegated sub-groups within sub-groups. That means, at one level, that the states and regions within India differ markedly from one another, which leads some observers to prophesy balkanization. But they overlook great heterogeneity *within* each of these varied states. It is for that reason that the current crisis in the Punjab is essentially a problem not of separatism but of bitter alienation between Sikhs and Hindus, and between Sikhs and the current government in New Delhi.

India was also free of any serious threat of revolution. Groups of leftists seeking to promote insurrection could be found in a few pockets, but their strength has declined since the early 1970s. One such group made headlines in late 1987 by kidnapping a few senior officials in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. But nowhere did they pose a

significant danger to the existing political order. This was partly because of the strength of the security forces, but mainly because conditions did not exist for potent insurgencies to develop. India is still a predominantly agrarian society in which discontented urban elements—which might be mobilized by extremists of the left or right in an effort to seize power—are still a manageably small portion of the population. The continuing strength of the joint family sometimes mitigates the suffering and discontents of would-be rebels. And in an overwhelmingly rural society such as this, the regime is unlikely to be overthrown unless a revolt could mold large numbers of disadvantaged rural dwellers into a solid revolutionary force. This would be very difficult to achieve in India because the rural poor are badly fragmented by social divisions, especially the *jati*—a small caste group (of which there are many thousands in India) beyond which a person is not supposed to intermarry or share food. Remarkably resilient, this institution has not wasted away in rural areas in the manner of pre–existing social institutions in much of the rest of Asia and Africa.

This is not to say that revolution cannot happen in India. *Jati* is sustained by important material supports that could give way. If the political system were to become far less responsive than it now is, if the rural economy were to go into prolonged decline, or if the proportion of rural dwellers who are landless were to increase dramatically over wide areas, then the outlook might change. But for the present, this is not a serious issue.

Nor was India faced with major problems of social disintegration of the kind which assail many governments in sub–Saharan Africa. There is great variation in the capacities of long–standing institutions in various parts of the non–Western world to survive colonialism, the development of modern market economies, and the modern state. In much of Africa, social institutions have often grown heavily dependent on the state, so that the decay of state institutions has thrown society into severe dislocation.[1] This is far less true in India where institutions—especially *jati*—have survived and in some cases even gained vitality by adapting to new circumstances. Rural society in India is thus far less dependent upon the state than its African counterparts, so that when political institutions undergo decay in India, far less social havoc is wrought as a result.[2]

Finally, despite a drought that devastated much of Indian agriculture, the nation avoided widespread starvation. The drought, which resulted

[1] See for example, Nelson Kasfir (ed.) *Race and Class in Africa* (London, 1982).

[2] James Manor, "Anomie in Indian Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), annual number 1983.

from a catastrophic failure of the monsoon rains on which the agricultural sector largely depends, affected nearly all of India's states and was then compounded by severe floods in four states. It is too early to make a definitive assessment of its impact, since data are still being gathered and its effects will continue to be felt beyond 1987. But despite immense suffering among vast numbers of landless and land-poor people and no small amount of bungling and corruption by state and central governments, the system worked well enough to prevent large numbers of deaths.

This is partly explained by the enormous increase in food production in India, thanks to the green revolution. Since Independence in 1947, wheat production has increased sevenfold, while rice production and food grain production generally have nearly trebled. This has been accompanied by an impressive effort to create reliable storage facilities, free of rats, damp, and other threats, and by the government's stockpiling of vast food grain reserves—more than 23 million tons—for just this sort of crisis. Linked to this is an enormous government program to procure food from farmers and a network of government-controlled outlets for food distribution which since 1980 have increased by nearly a third to about 340,000. The working of this system is often marred by corrupt practices, but in most areas this year it made a significant contribution on three fronts: (1) channelling stocks of grain to people in villages, (2) preventing acute shortages of grain which would drive prices on the open market (the primary distributor) beyond the reach of those at risk, and (3) delivering food to people who have turned to the government's food-for-work program in order to survive. The diversion by state and central governments of resources from other sectors to meet the emergency and the diversion of electricity away from industry to the rural sector were criticized by some—perhaps rightly—as inadequate, but they nonetheless made a difference.

Understanding Rajiv Gandhi

Great leaders seldom exercise decisive influence over socio-economic forces and huge, complex political institutions. But when power has been inordinately centralized in the hands of the leader of a political system, as occurred under Mrs. Gandhi for the benefit of herself and her son, then those who understand the system must assess the behavior of that leader. Rajiv Gandhi has become less important in Indian politics since he assumed office after his mother's assassination on October 31, 1984. This is partly because he has at times sought to rebuild some of the institutions which his mother systematically weakened, and because he wants to reduce the overdependence of the political system on him.

Unlike his mother, he sees such overdependence as a problem and not as an ideal mode of governance. He is also less dominant on the political scene because he has often been confused—institutions and rivals have a way of reasserting themselves when leaders are hesitant—and because people have grown somewhat disillusioned with him. Initial public expectations were so unrealistic that he was bound to disappoint, but the disillusionment has long since passed that point.

The problem is, which Rajiv do we discuss? We have seen at least three since he took office, and the only way to represent him adequately is to deal with each in turn. The first Rajiv is quiet and magnanimous. We caught occasional glimpses of him during the Emergency which his mother imposed in the mid–1970s. There was the occasion when he called aside a judge who had recently been transferred to a highly undesirable outpost because one of his rulings was not to the liking of Mrs. Gandhi and Rajiv's vindictive brother, Sanjay. Rajiv astonished the judge by apologizing for their behavior and saying that in a free country, the judiciary should not be intimidated in this way. We also saw plenty of the magnanimous Rajiv in the year following his election victory at the end of 1984. He forged accommodations with the leaders of the deeply alienated Assamese in the northeast and of the Sikhs in the Punjab by offering them generous concessions. He also departed from his mother's ways by adopting an accommodating approach to state governments that were in the hands of opposition parties.

And yet, only a few weeks earlier, during the 1984 election campaign, they had encountered a very different Rajiv, an aggressive, illiberal slasher. He had mounted slanderous attacks on the opposition parties as collaborators with Pakistan and anti–national forces. He also indulged in public gestures which many took to be anti–Sikh and chauvinistically Hindu, and he allowed anti–Sikh innuendo into his party's election advertisements.[3] No Indian prime minister had ever undertaken such a negative, confrontational election campaign. This second Rajiv was reliably reported to have taken a hard line a few months earlier when advising his mother to confront opposition–run state governments, and to send troops into the Golden Temple, an action which inflamed Sikh opinion and led ultimately to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi.

The third Rajiv is impatient and dismissive. It was this Rajiv who, at the centennial celebrations of his party, the Indian National Congress, denounced not only the opposition parties but the Congress itself as parasitic, sanctimonious and riddled with corruption. He seemed to dismiss the possibility that *any* party might perform acceptably. It was

[3] James Manor, "Rajiv Gandhi and Post–Election Politics in India." *The World Today* (London), March 1985.

this Rajiv who has shuffled and reshuffled his Cabinet so often that the central government has known little stability, and few ministers have had time to learn their jobs. It was this Rajiv who, during a nationally broadcast press conference, insulted his senior foreign ministry official by announcing that he would soon be replaced. It was this Rajiv who began cutting back on government controls and red tape, but then gave up in exasperation after a few months when those with an interest in the old system offered resistance.

One common tendency unites these three very different faces of the prime minister: he tends to pursue them to extremes. He will move impulsively in one direction, find that he has gone too far, and then over-correct by rushing headlong in another. This often lands him in political trouble. For example, the anti-Sikh themes in his 1984 election campaign alienated Sikhs and created high expectations among chauvinistic Hindus. After the election, he made concessions to Sikhs, but then discovered that if he delivered on them he would pay too high a price among Hindus. He therefore failed to deliver, generating still greater anger among the Sikhs, but leaving Hindus dismayed that he should have made such a deal in the first place.

We have caught sight of all three Rajivs during 1987, though magnanimity was in short supply because he was often on the defensive. But the fact that all three still emerge suggests that inconsistency and impulsiveness born of inexperience—he began dabbling in politics only three years before becoming prime minister—remain severe problems. In 1987, he was still failing to give clear, sustained signals on at least three crucial fronts, and with a nationwide election due in late 1989, time is running short. First, he needed to decide how he was to make a creative impact on Indian society. Like his mother in her later years, he has lost confidence in the public sector as an agency for positive action in society. Consequently, he has done very little in the way of programs to catalyze social change or provide resources to the disadvantaged. It seemed at first as if he would place his faith in free enterprise, but his sudden disinterest in liberalizing the economy has left the private sector still swathed in red tape. Unless the prime minister moves forcefully and soon in one of these two directions, it is difficult to see what advancements for Indian society he will be able to point to when he next faces the voters.

Rajiv Gandhi must also decide whether he intends to present himself as an enlightened protector of religious minorities (mainly Sikhs and Muslims) and as an advocate of tolerance and cultural diversity, which is the traditional posture of Congress leaders, or as a Hindu chauvinist. His mother—astonishingly for a daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru—had adopted the latter approach in the last two years of her life. After she

was murdered by members of the Sikh minority, Rajiv Gandhi continued to pursue the same themes and in response, an estimated 200,000 members of the R.S.S., the Hindu extremist organization, worked for the first time for Congress at the 1984 election.[4] Since then, he has at times wooed Muslims and Sikhs, but he has also returned often enough to Hindu chauvinist themes so that in 1987, the R.S.S. endorsed his party—an event that would have disgusted Nehru. Once again, the prime minister must decide which way he will turn if he wants to cultivate a reliable constituency at the next election.

Finally, he needs an instrument through which to govern this complex society, which means that he must revive his party, now in dire difficulties. Here again, inconsistency has caused him major problems. This topic is important enough to warrant a separate, detailed discussion.

The Troubled Congress Party

Rajiv Gandhi inherited a political party which had undergone severe decay since its heyday in the period up to the mid–1960s when it was one of the most formidable political machines that the world had ever seen. His mother viewed it mainly as a threat and had centralized power within it, starved it of political resources, and abandoned its long tradition of internal democracy. She tended, especially after 1975, to appoint as party officers large numbers of flatterers whose competence and probity were in doubt. Indeed, her son Sanjay—who killed himself doing aerobatics over New Delhi in 1980—actively sought out recruits with a history of violent and even criminal behavior. When Rajiv Gandhi succeeded his mother in late 1984, he knew that in many parts of India his party was afflicted by corruption, vicious factional quarrels, or both. But in the intervening years he has not succeeded in cleansing it, partly because he has been uncertain about how to tackle the problem, and mostly because he has often been irresolute.

It should be emphasized that the condition of the party varied considerably from state to state, as most things tend to do in this bafflingly complex country. For example, in Rajasthan during the 1984 election campaign, parliamentary candidates pleaded with Rajiv Gandhi to keep campaign funds out of the hands of the corrupt chief minister, lest they vanish. The prime minister complied and gave a highly effective former chief minister control of the campaign—which went

[4] The organization's full title is Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha. These comments are based on extensive interviews with political activists during the 1984 election campaign.

well—and later of the state government. The Congress party there has shown considerable improvement as a result.

Unfortunately it is difficult to find other such success stories. In some states—Kerala and Maharashtra are examples—Rajiv Gandhi has had good managers available to replace leaders who are unpopular, ineffective, or worse. But he has been unable to bring himself to impose on them because the undesirable incumbents have too many backers in their faction of the party. This probably cost Congress control of Kerala in the 1987 state election. In other states, the prime minister *has* appointed people he trusts but then has failed to offer them anything more than moral support when they need money and patronage to survive in the rough world of Congress politics. Several such men have been quickly eaten up by party strongmen, in episodes that have made Rajiv Gandhi appear naive and weak.

In several states, however, things are so far gone within Congress that there seems little that any leader can do. In West Bengal, violent conflict between Congress factions has long been a matter of routine. They even managed to stage a riotous melee on the other side of the country, in Bombay, at the centennial celebrations of the party, and numerous murders have occurred during their factional ructions. In Uttar Pradesh in the early 1980s, no fewer than 155 Congress members of the state legislature were convicted criminals—people convicted of actual crimes, not honorable veterans of Gandhian civil disobedience.[5] The Congress organization in neighboring Bihar is far more decayed than that of Uttar Pradesh.

One option which was long discussed by Rajiv Gandhi before he finally abandoned it in 1987 was the holding of elections for offices within the Congress party for the first time since 1972. There is disagreement among political analysts about the impact that this would have on the party.[6] Some contend that although it would entail the enrollment of bogus members and other questionable practices, they would on balance strengthen the Congress. Elections would force the party into unaccustomed actions: mobilizing members (which implies some role for them in the workings of the party), building coalitions of support, opening itself up to interaction with interest groups, and having to set priorities concerning which groups to reward and which policies to advocate. This whole process would, for a time, increase conflict within an already conflict-ridden party, but it is argued that this

[5] I am grateful to Paul Brass for revising Indian press reports on the number of convicts.

[6] I am grateful to Myron Weiner for help in clarifying this disagreement. He tends to the former view and I to the latter.