DEMOCRACY IN DISARRAY

> Not every individual or party is always disposed to use our democratic framework to further constructive purposes. It seems that the exercise of the democratic right sometimes takes the form of freedom even to destroy.
>
> INDIRA GANDHI to JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN, May 1968

I

WRITING SHORTLY AFTER THE 1977 elections, the *Guardian* correspondent in India thought that the return to democracy might be short lived. 'Democracy can only survive if there is economic progress and reform,' he wrote. 'Already, the new [Janata] government faces an economic crisis; inflation rampant again, an explosion of wage demands, and a wave of strikes. If it is overwhelmed by protest, the cycle of repression could start all over again.'[1]

Altogether more optimistic was the old India hand Horace Alexander, now eighty-seven and living in retirement in a Quaker home in Pennsylvania. In a letter published in the *New York Times* Alexander said that 'the astonishing Indian elections' showed that 'the common people of India have political courage', this derived from Gandhi and the heritage of the freedom movement. In a letter to a fellow Quaker he likewise called the poll verdict 'a triumph for the common people of India', adding: 'Let none ever say that "democratic liberty" is a bourgeois conception, which is only meaningful to a small number of left-wing intellectuals.'[2]

The indefatigable Alexander also wrote to Mrs Gandhi. During the emergency he had peppered her with anxious letters about the fate of freedom and of the men she had detained. Now he remembered his old friend Jawaharlal Nehru saying that he wished he could have had a spell away from politics, to read and simply relax. He wondered whether Nehru's daughter, out of power, would 'spend some time enjoying birds, up in the Himalaya, or in Kashmir'. There was some chit-chat about art and literature, and then the letter concluded: 'We shall try to keep up with the news from India, and perhaps in five years from now, you will be in office once again with the biggest majority ever. Such is democracy!'[3]

Actually, it took less than three years for Mrs Gandhi to return to power. Her Congress Party won 353 seats in the 1980 elections, one more than in the 'Garibi Hatao' campaign of 1971. It did very well in the south, as before, while in the north it benefited hugely from a division of the vote between the two rival Janata factions, here contesting as separate parties. In the key state of Uttar Pradesh, for example, the Congress obtained 36 per cent of the popular vote, yet won 60 per cent of the parliamentary seats. One Janata faction got 22.6 per cent of the vote, the other 29 per cent; between them, they won 32 seats in the state to the Congress's 50.[4]

The 1980 elections, notes the editor Prabhas Joshi, marked the 'end of ideology' in Indian politics. Previous polls were fought and won on the planks of democracy, socialism, secularism and non-alignment. In 1980, however, Mrs Gandhi spoke not of the abolition of poverty but of her ability to rule. Janata could not hold together a government, she told the voters; whereas she could and had. Their bickerings apart, there were other factors that went against Janata. There were shortages of

basic consumer goods, attributed naturally to the party in power. As one election cry went: '*Janata ho gayi fail, Kha gayi chini aur mitti ka tel*' (The Janata party has failed, Eaten up sugar and paraffin on the way).[5]

The Janata Party had thoroughly discredited itself. As a reporter covering the elections found, while Indira Gandhi had a 'tarnished image', her opponents were 'all tarnish and no image'.[6] Meanwhile, the rash of attacks on Scheduled Castes turned this very numerous voting segment back towards the Congress. Sanjay Gandhi had apologized to the Muslims for the excesses of the emergency; sections of this 'vote bank' returned to the fold as well.[7]

In most of India the elections were moderately free. In parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, however, where roads were poor and telephone lines non-existent, the Election Commission was unable to monitor or check the capturing of booths by armed gangs. Here, there was a 'free enterprise militia' operating, such that 'adult franchise ha[d] been replaced by vicarious franchise', where the candidate with the most guns at his command could 'perform the function of "mass voting" on behalf of the electorate'.[8]

II

Not long after Mrs Gandhi returned to power, a veteran political scientist with Congress sympathies advised the prime minister to remake the party as 'the palpably real institution that the Congress was under Nehru'. For it was 'essential that a sharing of power replace its personalisation, that a leadership drawing its power from the grassroots rather than above should be allowed to emerge'. Mrs Gandhi's 'restored charisma' could then be used 'in the service of shoring-up and reinforcing the institutions of an open polity before it dissipates again as in the past'.[9]

These sentiments were at once noble and naive. For it was not just the Congress Party that Mrs Gandhi believed she embodied, but the Indian nation itself. In May 1980 she told a visiting journalist how, 'for many long years, I have been the target of attack [from] individuals, groups and parties', these either 'Hindu and Muslim fanatics', or 'old feudal interests', or 'sympathetic to foreign ideologies'. Where she stood 'for India's unfettered independence of action, self-reliance and economic strength', those 'who are against self-reliance, or secularism or socialism find some reason or other to malignme'.[10]

'Paranoia' may be the most appropriate word here. Anyway, in this frame of mind Indira Gandhi was in no mood to share power except with her son Sanjay, who was now both a member of Parliament and the general secretary of the Congress Party. Indeed, as one Delhi journal remarked, Sanjay was once more 'the most vital factor in Indian politics'. When Mrs Gandhi dismissed nine state governments after the 1980 elections it was Sanjay who allotted the Congress tickets for the assembly seats, Sanjay who decided who would be chief minister when and if Congress won. The newly appointed chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, spoke for many when he told the press that 'Sanjay is a leader in his own right and he is my leader too'.[11]

Mrs Gandhi was now sixty-three, and thoughts of the succession were not far from her mind. However, on 23 June 1980 Sanjay was killed while flying a single-engined plane for fun, as he was wont to do. He did three loops in the air, tried a fourth but lost control. The plane crashed a mere 500 yards from the home he shared with his mother. Both Sanjay and his co-pilot died instantly.[12]

Mrs Gandhi returned to work four days later. She was desperately lonely, one reporter remarking on her 'total and inviolable aloofness'.[13] By the end of August she had persuaded her elder

son to fill the breach. Rajiv Gandhi had shown little previous interest in politics. He was a family man, devoted to his Italian wife Sonia and their two small children. He worked as a pilot with the sole domestic carrier, Indian Airlines. He flew Avros to Luck now and Jaipur, and his main professional ambition was to be allowed to pilot Boeings between Delhi and Bombay.

Now, however, there was increasing pressure on him to enter politics, most of it coming from the prime minister herself. Speaking to an interviewer in August 1980, Rajiv Gandhi said that there was 'no question of my stepping into [Sanjay's] shoes'. Asked whether he would take up a party post or contest elections, Rajiv answered that he 'would prefer not to'. He added that his wife was 'dead against the idea of my getting into politics'.[14]

Nine months later Rajiv Gandhi was elected an MP from his brother's old constituency, Amethi. When asked why he had changed his mind, Rajiv answered: 'The way I look at it is that Mummy has to be helped somehow.' His entry into politics, wrote one *very* sympathetic journalist, surreptitious though it is, may be Mrs Gandhi's concept of giving India stability in leadership and continuity in government'. With the 'lack of leadership of any kind on the horizon', being a member of the Nehru family gave him a 'high identification quotient' and 'a head start'.[15]

Recognizing the signs – or bowing to the inevitable – Congress members and ministers all across the country queued up to *salaam* Rajiv. He was asked to lay foundation stones for medical colleges, open plants generating electricity for Harijan colonies and give speeches to Congress clubs on Nehru's birthday.[16]

As Rajiv Gandhi took his first steps in Indian politics, his mother was at work on the world stage, rebuilding bridges torn down during the emergency. Mrs Gandhi was deeply concerned about the battering her image had taken in the West. Now that she had been returned to power via the ballot box, she was determined to repair the damage. For a full eight months in 1982 the United Kingdom hosted a Festival of India, featuring exhibitions of Indian art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, concerts by Ravi Shankar and M. S. Subbulakshmi at the Royal Festival Hall and much else. The performers ran the gamut from the high and classical to the earthy and folk. Thus a high school in Worcestershire was turned into a 'miniature Rajasthan', with dancers and storytellers from that state camping for a week, their performances repaid in kind by the school putting on a performance of Kipling's *Jungle Book*.

The festival was promoted and part-funded by the government of India. The Indian prime minister visited the UK at its beginning and end, emerging as the 'star of the show'. During the emergency, sections of the British press had portrayed Mrs Gandhi as an ogress; now, commented one columnist, 'she must welcome the somewhat more flattering attention she is receiving'. At one function, where she and the British prime minister were the chief guests, Mrs Gandhi said that 'India was committed to democracy and socialism', adding that 'in respect of the latter we differ from Mrs Thatcher'. Meeting a group of newspaper editors, she tartly remarked: 'I hope you will give up calling me Empress of India now'.

The Festival of India was deemed a great success by its organizers; encores were to follow in the United States, the Soviet Union and France. The last word on the *tamasha* might rest with the cartoonist R. K. Laxman, who portrayed two half-naked men on an Indian street, with one reading a newspaper and saying to the other: 'But for such a festival we wouldn't know how great we and our achievements are!'[17]

III

Cartoonists are professionally obliged to mock the mighty, but in Laxman's case his comments might also have had something to do with the fact that he lived in Bombay, a city where the extremes of wealth and poverty were more strikingly manifest than anywhere else in India. As it happened, the festival in London coincided with an indefinite strike by the textile workers of Bombay. They were led into action by Datta Samant, a medical doctor whose political ideology was uncertain but who possessed sufficient charisma to allow him to supplant the socialists and communists who had hitherto led the city's trade unions.

Datta Samant's career in Bombay began with a unit called Empire Dyeing, where he was able to get the workers a salary increase of Rs200 a month. His success encouraged him to move into other factories; soon, the bulk of the workers in Bombay's vast textile industry owed their allegiance to him. Their wages had grown incrementally over the years; inadequately protected against inflation, they sought an overhaul of the salary structure. Samant asked that the minimum wage be increased from Rs670 to Rs940 a month; when the demand was rejected out of hand, he called for astrike. Beginning on 18 January 1982, the strike was to last almost two years. More than 200,000 workers participated, and more than 22 million man-days of work were lost.

This was a genuine mass movement, the ripples from which were felt throughout the city and beyond. Thousands of workers courted arrest; others clashed with blacklegs seeking to break the strike. The truculent mood affected other sectors of the city's labour force. Underpaid police constables sought to form a union of their own; their protests spilled out into the streets. Eventually, the policemen had to be disarmed and jailed by the paramilitary Border Security Force.[18]

In the countryside too there were stirrings along class lines. Naxalite activists, detained during the emergency but released afterwards, were making their presence felt in the tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh among communities oppressed by the state's forestry department and by Hindu moneylenders. Other Naxalite groups were at work in the plains of central Bihar, organizing Harijan labourers against their upper-caste landlords. Some sympathizers, such as the Swedish writer Jan Myrdal, saw in these stirrings the possibility, and hope, that the Chinese revolution might one day find its Indian counterpart.[19]

The early 1980s saw fresh mobilization on the lines of ethnicity as well. The movement for atribal state of Jharkhand had taken new and more militant forms. By official figures, some Rs30,000 million had been spenton 'tribal development' in the Chotanagpur plateau. Where this money had gone it was hard to say, for the people still lived in 'a primeval darkness'; without schools, hospitals, roads or electricity, with their lands seized by outsiders and their forests closed to them by the state. 'The jharkhand demand is set against such a background', reported the writer Mahasveta Devi. 'Tales of woe and exploitation on the one hand; the pulse of resistance on the other.'[20]

The protests in jharkhandwere ledbyShibu Soren, a young man with long black locks who quickly became a folk hero. He organized the forced harvest of paddy in lands 'stolen' from the adivasis by *dikus* (outsiders), as well as the invasion of forest lands that they claimed as their own. In September 1980 the police fired on a crowd of protesting tribals at Gua, killing at least fifteen people. The incident served only to intensify the demand for Jharkhand.[21]

There were also demands, if not as actively expressed as in Jhark-hand, for two new states: Chattisgarh, to be carved out of the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, constituting the Himalayan districts of Uttar Pradesh. These too were regions rich in timber, water and minerals, in resources increasingly exploited by and for the benefit of the larger national economy, yet dispossessing the local inhabitants in the process.[22]

The 1980s also saw a renewal of Naga militancy. During the emergency the government of India

had been able to persuade many members of Phizo's Naga National Council to lay down their arms and come out of hiding. Some in the administration hoped that this 'Shillong Accord' (named for the town where it was signed) would signal the end of the rebellion. However, the accord was seen as a sell-out by Naga radicals such as T. Muivah. Muivah was a Thangkul Naga who, in the 1960s, had been one of the first to seek the help of China. Muivah had stayed four years in Yunnan, being trained by the People's Liberation Army. Deeply impressed by the Cultural Revolution, he sought to blend its ideals with the faith he was born into, thus to combine evangelical Christianity with revolutionary socialism.

In 1980 Muivah and Isaak Swu setup the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). By now Chinese aid had dried up, so Muivah instead built up links with other insurgent groups in India's north-east and in Burma. A journalist who met him in his jungle hideout reported Muivah's view that 'the only hope the Nagas had to achieve their independence would be if India itself broke up'. The Naga leader had his contacts among Sikh militants and Kashmiri separatists, and 'he fervently hoped a similar movement would emerge among the Tamils of southern India – which would indeed plunge the country into the anarchy he desired'.[23]

Muivah's strongest following was among his fellow Thangkuls, who lived in the upland areas of Manipur. Were an independent Naga nation ever formed these hills would be part of it, but as things stood the Thangkuls were less than happy to be ruled by the Meitei Hindus who were Manipur's dominant community. Worried by the birth of the NSCN, the Indian government increased troop deployment in the Ukhrul district of Manipur. On 19 February 1982 the insurgents ambushed a convoy on the Imphal-Ukhrul road, killing twenty-two soldiers of the Sikh Regiment, some officers among them. The army's answer was to go on a rampage, searching every village in the district, abusing the men and attacking the women. A civil liberties team visited the area, recording the testimonies of the victims. They found that 'even though only a few people supported the underground they were all suspects in the eyes of the army'.[24]

IV

There were movements for separate or new states within or outside the Union, and movements for greater autonomy within existing states. In the old Congress stronghold of Andhra Pradesh there was growing resentment at the centre's tendency to 'impose' chief ministers. Between 1978 and 1982 Mrs Gandhi changed the state's chief minister no fewer than four times. In February 1982 the new incumbent, T. Anjaiah, went to Hyderabad airport to welcome Rajiv Gandhi, accompanied by a huge posse of supporters with garlands. Rajiv chastised the chief minister for bringing a crowd, and in such strong words that there were tears in Anjaiah's eyes.[25]

The humiliation was felt personally, and collectively, with the Telugu media portraying it as an insult to the pride of the Andhras. Among those provoked into action was the great film star N. T. Rama Rao, who was to Telugu cinema what M. G. Ramachandran had been to its Tamil counterpart – its acknowledged hero and superstar. (By one reckoning he had acted in 150 movies; by another, 300. A third source chose to be much more precise, putting the number at 292.)

Unlike MGR, 'NTR' had no political past. Nor did his films usually carry a social message (they were mostly based on mythological themes). Now, on the eve of his sixtieth birthday, he formed a new regional party, Telugu Desam, which stood for the 'honour and self-respect of the 60 million Telugu speaking people'. No longer, he said, would the great state of Andhra Pradesh be treated as a

'branch office' of the Congress Party.[26]

The new party was formed in March 1982; elections to the state assembly were due at the end of the year. In preparation for the polls, NTR toured the districts of the state, speaking out against the 'corrupt' administration of the Congress. He travelled in a van remodelled to look like a chariot. At public meetings he would emerge dramatically from the vehicle, atop a platform raised with the help of a generator. He usually wore saffron, the colour of renunciation, indicating that he had given up his film career to serve the people. He was the mythological hero made real, come to rid the world of greed and corruption and bring justice for all. Women flocked to his meetings – he, in turn, offered them universities of their own and the preferential allotment of jobs in the state sector.[27]

While the national press was sceptical of NTR's chances, the major Telugu daily *Eenadu* threw its considerable weight behind him. Its confidence was rewarded when the Telugu Desam won a comfortable two-thirds majority in the assembly. In the second week of January 1983 Rama Rao was sworn in as chief minister at the Fateh Maidan in Hyderabad, with 200,000 cheering Andhras crowded into the grounds.[28]

One of NTR's first acts on assuming power was to instruct his food department to sell rice at two rupees a kilogram, to redeem a promise made before the polls. In general he acted as if he was the party as well as government, in this respect emulating his friend MGR as well as his rival Indira Gandhi. 'If the Prime Minister thinks that she is India', commented one socialist, then 'NTR behaves as if he is the sole representative of six and half crores of Telugu people. Telugu Desam MLAs have no voice in shaping the policies and programmes of the Government. NTR runs the show both as Chief Minister and also as the President of hisparty.'[29] Like Mrs Gandhi again, NTR was prone to nepotism, as when he allowed a film studio to be built by his son on unauthorized land.[30]

V

Another, more serious, movement for autonomy was taking shape in the state of Assam; 'more serious' because it was driven by a groundswell of grass-roots opinion rather than by individual charisma, and because this state was located not in the Indian heartland but in its long-troubled extremities.

Assam shared borders with West Bengal and several states of the north-east, as well as with the countries of Bangladesh and Bhutan. Assamese was the state language, but Bengali was also widely spoken. There was a long history of hostility between the speakers of the two languages. Bengalis had dominated the middle and lower rungs of the colonial administration. As officials, teachers and magistrates they exercised great authority and power over the local Assamese, treating them with condescension and even contempt. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, land-hungry Bengali peasants had begun to move into the forests and lowlands of Assam. After Independence this migration continued, accelerating whenever political instability or economic crisis affected East Bengal or, as it later became, Bangladesh. In the decade of the 1970s, for example, the number of registered voters in Assam jumped from 6.2 million to almost 9 million, the increase accounted for chiefly by immigrants from Bangladesh.[31]

The Assamese feared cultural subordination at the hands of the Bengali middle class, and demographic conquest at the hands of the Bengali peasantry. There were episodic riots in the 1950s and 1960s aimed at driving the immigrants back to where they came from. However, it was only from the late 1970s that these sentiments were transmuted into a widespread social movement.[32]

The key organization in this transformation was the All-Assam Students Union (AASU). Its network extended throughout the state; all student unions in schools and colleges were affiliated to it. Beginning in 1979 and carrying on over the next five years, the AASU led hundreds of strikes and processions intended to press the central government to clear their homeland of the infiltrators.

Assamese nationalists had based their arguments on culture and demography. AASU added a third leg to the stool: economics. The economy of Assam was manifestly dominated by outsiders. The rich tea plantations of the state were mostly owned by firms based in London or Calcutta. Assam had India's most productive oil fields, yet the liquid was pumped up by public-sector firms that employed few locals (and none at the top level of management). Worse, the oil was then sent to refineries located in other states. Local trade and commerce was controlled by Marwaris from Rajasthan. All in all, Assam was an 'internal colony', supplying cheap raw materials for metropolitan India to process and profit from.

The Assam movement's larger demand was for a new economic policy, where the state's residents could obtain income and employment from the best use of the state's natural resources. Its more immediate demand, however, was for the deletion of immigrants from the voters' list preparatory to their deportation from the state. This led to an unfortunate but perhaps inevitable polarization on communal lines. For many of the more recent immigrants were, in fact, Muslims. The Congress Party, then ruling in the centre and long dominant in the state, was accused of protecting the immigrants as a captive vote bank. Also hastening the polarization was the formation of an All-Assam Minorities Students Union (AAMSU).[33]

Visiting Assam in the summer of 1980, a Delhi journalist found that the 'movement had undoubtedly acquired gigantic proportions'. No longer was it confined to the literate or articulate. The Assamese people as a whole felt 'increasingly frustrated, driven to the wall. Aside from the anti-foreigner sentiment, the movement has developed other dangerous strains – anti-Bengali, anti-Left, anti-Muslim, anti-non-Assamese, and slowly but discernibly, even anti-Indian.'[34] Bengalis were being attacked and their homes burnt. But the central government was also targeted. Railway tracks were uprooted by individual saboteurs, while the AASU stopped the export of plywood and jute from the state. They were even successful in blocking the flow of oil, forcing the government to declare the pipeline and the land extending up to half a kilometre on either side of it a 'protected area'. Ultimately the army had to be called in to restore oil supplies from Assam to are finery in distant Bihar.[35]

In the last week of July 1980 the prime minister warned the AASU leaders that their actions could lead to retribution. 'Suppose other states refused to supply Assam with steel?' she asked. 'How would the Assamese develop their industry?' Indian federalism was based on interdependence. For 'it was only in the shadow of a bigger unit that each unit can survive; otherwise outside pressures will be too great to bear'.[36]

Even as this warning was issued, however, the central government had begun negotiations with the AASU leaders. The talks were to continue for the next three years, on and off, sparking fresh strikes and protests whenever they broke down. Officially the negotiators were between the AASU on one side and the Home Ministry on the other. But numerous interlocutors were also used, among them the Gandhi Peace Foundation and the Manipur chief minister R. K. Dorendra Singh. The real bone of contention was the cut-off date beyond which immigration could be considered 'illegal'. The AASU wanted all migrants who came in after 1951 to be removed from the voters' list and deported. The government of India thought this struck at the federal principle, violating the freedom of citizens to move from one part of the country to another. They were prepared, however, to recognize 1971 as the

cut-off date, for it was then that the happenings in East Pakistan had provoked an unprecedented, so to say unnatural migration across the borders.

By one account, representatives of government and the agitation met on as many as 114 days in the calendar years 1980, 1981 and 1982. Various compromises were discussed: one, suggested by the Gandhi Peace Foundation, recommended that those who entered Assam between 1951 and 1961 be conferred rights of residence and voting (in effect, citizenship), those who came between 1961 and 1971 be dispersed to other states of India, and those who came after 25 March 1971 (the date on which Bangladesh declared itself a sovereign state) be deported.[37]

In the event, a solution proved intractable. The conflict resumed, taking ever uglier forms. In one particularly gruesome incident in February 1983 hundreds of Bengali Muslims were slaughtered by a mob of Assamese Hindus and tribals. Thus was fulfilled the grim prediction of the veteran journalist Devdutt, who, writing when the talks between the movement and the government were in their early stages, noted that if a resolution was not arrived at, 'like the turbulent Brahmaputra coursing along 450 miles in Assam, the seething discontent and disaffection will also wreak havoc'.[38]

VI

Contemporaneous with the Assam movement, there was a still more serious agitation for greater autonomy in the state of Punjab. I say 'still more serious' because Punjab bordered Pakistan, a country with which India had fought three wars. Besides, the majority community of the state were not Hindus but Sikhs. To the primordial attachments of language and region was thus added the potentially deadly element of religion.

As in Assam, the Punjab 'agitation', or 'movement', or 'crisis' (to give it three among its many names) had causes both distant and proximate. A section of the Sikh intelligentsia hoped for the renewal, in some shape or form, of the Sikh state ruled by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the first half of the nineteenth century. Others looked only as far back as Partition, and the tragedies and losses suffered by the community then. It had taken twenty years of almost ceaseless struggle to compel New Delhi to constitute a Sikh majority province within India. However, even after the new Punjab was formed in 1966, the major Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, was unable authoritatively to *rule* the state. It rankled deeply that in 1967 and 1969 the Akalis had to form unstable coalitions with 'Hindu' parties such as the Jana Sangh, whereas in 1971 its old rival, the Congress, was able to come to power in the Punjab on its own.[39]

In October 1973 the Working Committee of the Akali Dal passed the 'Anandpur Sahib Resolution'. This asked the government of India to hand over Chandigarh to Punjab (it then shared the city with Haryana); to also hand over Punjabi-speaking areas then with other states; and to increase the proportion of Sikhs in the army. Asking for a recasting of the Indian Constitution on 'real federal principles', it said that 'in this new Punjab and in other States the Centre's interference would be restricted to defence, foreign relations, currency, and general administration; all other departments would be in the jurisdiction of Punjab (and other states) which would be fully entitled to frame [their] own laws on these subjects'.

By one reading, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution merely sought to make real the promise of states' autonomy hinted at by the constitution. But the Resolution was also amenable to more dangerous interpretations. The preamble spoke of the Akali Dal as 'the very embodiment of the hopes and aspirations of the Sikh *Nation*'. The 'political goal of the Panth [community]' was defined as 'the

pre-eminence of the Khalsa [or Sikh brotherhood]', with the 'fundamental policy' of the Akali Dal being the 'realization of this birth-right of the Khalsa through creation of congenial environment and a political set-up'.[40]

Perhaps 1973 was not the best time to make these demands, with Mrs Indira Gandhi riding high on the wave of a war recently won and the centre more powerful than ever before. Its powers were increased still further with the emergency, when thousands of Akalis were put in jail. But in 1977 the emergency was lifted, elections called, and the Congress Party comprehensively trounced. With the Akalis now in power in the Punjab, the demands of the Anandpur Sahib resolution were revived, and new ones added. Among the losses at Partition were two of the five rivers that gave the state its name; if that was not bad enough, the Indian Punjab had to share the remaining three with the states of Haryana and Rajasthan. The Akalis claimed a greater share of these waters; to this economic demand was coupled a cultural one, the designation of Amritsar, home to the holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple, as a Holy City'.[41]

In April 1978 there was a mass convention at Amritsar of a religious sect, the Nirankaris. The Nirankaris thought of themselves as Sikhs, but since they believed in a living Guru were regarded as heretics by the faithful. With the Akalis in power, some priests professed shame that the Holy City was being profaned thus. Leading the opposition to the Nirankari meeting was a hit her to obscure preacher named Jarnail Singh Bhind ran wale. Born into a family of Jat Sikhs, Bhindranwale had left his wife and children to become head of a seminary called the Damdami Taksal. His was an impressive presence: over six feet tall, slim and athletic, with probing eyes and dressed in along blue robe. He was an effective and even inspiring preacher, with a deep knowledge of the Sikh scriptures. He claimed that Sikhs 'were slaves in independent India', discriminated against by the Hindus. Bhindranwale wanted the Sikhs to purify themselves and return to the fundamentals of their faith. He spoke scathingly of the corrupt and effete Hindu, but mocked even more the modernized Sikh, he who had so far forgotten himself as to cut his hair and consume tobacco and alcohol.[42]

By some accounts, Bhindranwale was built up by Sanjay Gandhi and the Union home minister Zail Singh (himself a former chief minister of Punjab) as a counter to the Akalis. Writing in September 1982 the journalist Ayesha Kagal remarked that the preacher 'was originally a product nurtured and marketed by the Centre to cut into the Akali Dal's sphere of influence'.[43] The keyword here is 'originally'. For whoever it was who first promoted him, Bhindranwale quickly demonstrated his own independent source of charisma and influence. To him were attracted many Jats of a peasant background who had seen the gains of the Green Revolution being cornered by the large landowners. Other followers came from the lower Sikh castes of artisans and labourers; they saw in the process of purification their own social advancement. Bhindranwale also benefited from the general increase of religiosity which, in the Punjab as in some other places, followed upon rapid and unexpected economic development.[44]

While the Nirankari convention was in progress at Amritsar in April 1978 Bhindranwale preached an angry sermon from the precincts of the Golden Temple. Moved by his words, a crowd of Sikhs descended upon the place where the heretics were meeting. The Nirankaris fought back; in the battle that ensued, fifteen people died.

Sikh pride took another blow in 1980, when the Akalis were dismissed and the Congress returned to power in Punjab. In June of that year a group of students met at the Golden Temple and proclaimed the formation of an independent Sikh republic. The republic had a name, Khalistan, and a president, a Sikh politician based in London named Jagjit Singh Chauhan. Primarily it was Sikh emigres who were behind this move; the pronouncement was made simultaneously in the United

Kingdom, the United States, Canada and France.[45]

The government in Delhi was not unduly worried by these elements at the fringe. Its attention was focused on the Akalis, who, out of power, had chosen the path of confrontation. Their new leader, Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal, lodged himself in the GoldenTemple, from where he would announce street protests on a variety of themes such as the handing over of Chandigarh, or the greater allocation of canal water. Bhindranwale was operating from another part of the temple. He had acquired a group of devoted gun-toting followers who acted as his acolytes and bodyguards and, on occasion, as willing and unpaid killers.

Through the early 1980s the politics of agitation co-existed uneasily with the politics of assassination. In April 1980 the Nirankari leader Baba Gurcharan Singh was shot dead in New Delhi. It was widely believed that Bhindranwale was behind the killing, but no action was taken. Then in September 1981 came the murder of Lala Jagat Narain, an influential editor who had polemicized vigorously against Sikh extremism. This time a warrant went out for the preacher's arrest. The police went to pick him up from a *gurdwara* in Haryana, but by the time they arrived Bhindranwale had returned to the safety of his own seminary in the Punjab. The chief minister, Darbara Singh, was all for pursuing him there, but he was dissuaded by the Union home minister, Zail Singh, who was worried about the political fall-out that might result. Bhindranwale then sent word that he was willing to turn himself in, but at a time of his choosing, and only so long as the arresting officers were Sikhs wearing beards. Amazingly, the Punjab government agreed to these humiliating terms. Two weeks after the murder the preacher gave himself up outside his seminary, even as a crowd of supporters chanted slogans and threw stones at the police. A tseveral other places in the state his followers attacked state property, provoking the police to fire on them. According to one report, a dozen people died in the violence surrounding Bhindranwale's arrest.[46]

Three weeks later he was released for lack of evidence. Two chroniclers of the Punjab agitation write that 'Bhindranwale's release was the turning point in his career. He was now seen as a hero who had challenged and defeated the Indian government'. Another says that with the drama of his arrest 'Bhindranwale had transformed himself from a murder suspect [into] a new political force'.[47]

Throughout 1982 there were many rounds of negotiations between the centre and the Akalis. No agreement was reached, the sticking points being the areas Punjab would give up to Haryana in exchange for Chandigarh, and the sharing of river waters. On 26 January 1983, Republic Day, the Akali legislators in the state assembly resigned, the timing of their action suggesting perhaps an uncertain commitment to the Indian Constitution. The challenge of Bhindranwale was forcing them to become more extreme. The Akalis were now prone to comparing Congress rule to the bad old days of the Mughals. They began organizing *shaheed jathas* (martyrdom squads) to fight the new tormentors of the Sikhs.[48]

On 22 April 1983 a high-ranking Sikh policeman, A. S. Atwal, was killed as he left the Golden Temple after prayers. The man who shot him at close range coolly walked in afterwards. Atwal's murder further demoralized the Punjab police, itself overwhelmingly Sikh. A spate of bank robberies followed. Sections of the Hindu minority began fleeing the state. Those who remained organized themselves under a Hindu Suraksha Sangh (Defence Force). Centuries of peaceable relations between Hindus and Sikhs were collapsing under the strain.

In interviews, Bhindranwale described the Sikhs as a 'separate *qaum*', a word that is sometimes taken to mean 'community' but which can just as easily be translated as 'nation'. He had not asked for Khalistan, he said, butwere it offered to him he would not refuse. The prime minister of India he mocked as a 'Panditain', daughter of a Brahmin, a remark redolent with the contempt that the Jat Sikh

has for those who work with their minds rather than their hands. Asked whether he would meet Mrs Gandhi he answered, 'No I don't want to, but if she wants to meet me, she can come here.'[49]

To his followers, Bhindranwale could be even more blunt. 'If the Hindus come in search of you', he told them once, 'smash their heads with television antennas.' He reminded them of the heroic history of the Sikhs. When the Mughals had tried to destroy the Gurus, 'our fathers had fought themwith 40 Sikhs against 100,000 assailants'. They could do the same now with their new oppressors. There was also a contemporary model at hand – that of Israel. If the few Jews there could keep the more numerous Arabs at bay, said Bhindranwale, then the Sikhs could and must do the same with the Hindus.[50]

On 5 October 1983, terrorists stopped a bus on the highway, segregated the Hindu passengers and shot them. The next day President's Rule was imposed in the state. In the last weeks of 1983 Bhindranwale took up residence in the Akal Takht, a building second in importance only to the Golden Temple. The latter, standing in the middle of a shimmering blue lake, is venerated by Sikhs as the seat of spiritual authority; the former, an imposing marble building immediately to its north, had historically served as the seat of temporal authority. It was from the Akal Takht that the great Gurus issued their *hukumnamas*, edicts that all Sikhs were obliged to follow and honour. It was here that Sikh warriors came to receive blessings before launching their guerrilla campaigns against their medieval oppressors.[51] That Bhindranwale chose now to move into the Akal Takht, and that no one had the courage to stop him, were acts steeped in the most dangerously profound symbolism.

VII

The rise of communal violence in the Punjab falsified numerous predictions made about the province and its peoples. In the 1950s it was claimed that the Sikhs would become increasingly 'Hinduized', indeed, become a sect of the great pan-Indian faith instead of standing apart as a separate religion. In the 1960s it was argued that, having tasted power, the Akali Dal would become 'secularized'; that its rhetoric and policies would henceforth be directed by economic rather than religious considerations. By the 1970s conflict had replaced consensus as the dominant motif of Punjab social science, except that the trouble, when it came, was expected to run along the lines of class, with the Green Revolution turning Red.

By the beginning of the next decade, however, the situation of the Sikhs in India was being compared to that of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Here, as there, wrote the political scientist Paul Wallace in 1981, 'language, religion and regionalism combined into a potentially explosive context which political elites struggle to contain'.[52] Within the next year or two this mixture had been made still more deadly by the addition of a fourth ingredient: armed violence.

Hindu-Sikh conflict was, in the context of Indian history, unprecedented. While it was manifesting itself, other older and more predictable forms of social conflict were also being played out. Thus the journalist M. J. Akbar, compiling his reports of the 1980s into a single volume, called the book *Riot after Riot* – a title that was melancholy as well as appropriate.[53]

One axis of this conflict was, naturally, caste. In January-February 1981 the state of Gujarat was convulsed by clashes between forward and backward castes. The issue under contention was the reservation of seats in engineering and medical colleges for those of low status. The Harijans in particular were very scantily represented, both as students and teachers. Of 737 faculty members in the medical colleges of Gujarat, only 22 were Harijan. However, their demands for greater

representation were bitterly resisted. The conflict spread well beyond the students. Even the textile workers of Ahmedabad, long united under one banner, were soon divided on caste lines. At least fifty people died in the violence.[54]

A second axis of conflict, even more naturally, was religion. During the Janata regime the communal temperature had begun to rise alarmingly. With politicians allied to it in power in the centre and in the states, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh grew in strength hand influence. In 1979 there was a major riot in the steel town of Jamshedpur; a judicial inquiry ordered by the government concluded that the RSS 'had a positive hand in creating a climate which was most propitious for the outbreak of communal disturbances'.[55]

After the Janata party's rout in the 1980 elections, its Jana Sangh members broke away to form a party of their own. They called it the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but the new name did little to disguise a very old aim. There was once more a distinct political party to represent and advance the 'Hindu' interest. As it happened, the formation of the BJP heralded a wave of religious violence in northern and western India. There were major Hindu-Muslim riots in the Uttar Pradesh towns of Moradabad (August 1980) and Meerut (September–October 1982); in the Bihar town of Biharsharif in April–May 1981; in the Gujarat towns of Vadodara (September 1981), Godhra (October 1981) and Ahmedabad (January 1982); in Hyderabad, capital of Andhra Pradesh, in September 1983; and in the Maharashtra towns of Bhiwandi and Bombay in May–June 1984. In each case the riots ran on for days, with much loss of life and property, and were finally quelled only by armed force.[56]

From the plentiful literature on these numerous riots can be discerned some recurrent themes.[57] The riots were generally sparked by a quarrel that was in itself trifling. It could be a dispute over a piece of land claimed by both Hindus and Muslims, or over street space claimed by both Hindu and Muslim hawkers. It could be provoked by a pig straying into a mosque or a dead cow being found near a temple. Sometimes the cause was the coincidence of a Hindu and a Muslim festival leading to encounters on the street of large processions of both communities.

However, once begun, most disputes quickly escalated. The role of rumour was critical here, with the original incident being magnified in each retelling until a simple clash between two individuals had become a holy war between two simultaneously violated religions. Communal organizations helped this escalation, as did party rivalries, with local politicians identifying with one side or the other. Words gave way to blows, fisticuffs to sword fights, these in turn to firebombs and bullets. The police either looked on or were partisan. In the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh they invariably favoured the Hindus, encouraging and sometimes even participating in the looting of Muslim homes and shops.

Riots typically took place in towns where the Muslims constituted a significant proportion of the population – between 20 per cent and 30 per cent – and where some of them had lately climbed up the economic ladder, for example as artisans servicing a wider market. Whoever started the quarrel – and there were always claims and counter-claims – it was the Muslims and the poor who were the main sufferers: the Muslims because, even while numerous enough to fight their corner, they were in the end outnumbered by a factor of two or three to one; the poor because they lived in the crowded parts of town, in homes built from fragile or inflammable materials. A fire, once begun, would quickly engulf the whole locality. The middle class, on the other hand, lived in spacious residential colonies where it was easier to ensure personal as well as collective security.

In India, caste and communal conflict had usually run in parallel, but in the 1980s they began subtly influencing one another. A critical event here was the decision of an entire village of Harijans in Tamil Nadu to convert to Islam. On 19 February 1981 1,000 residents of Meenakshipuram became

Muslims. With their religion and personal names, they even changed the name of their village; henceforth, they said, it would be known as 'Rehmatnagar'.

The Meenakshipuram incident provoked outrage among the RSS and its sister organizations. The cry was raised of 'Hinduism in danger', and the sinister hand of 'Gulf money' seen in the conversions. The Arab countries, it was claimed, were using their petrodollars to proselytize in the subcontinent, with Indian Muslims being willing accomplices. Islamic preachers were indeed active in the area, but the Harijans were also reacting to the continuing oppression by upper-caste landlords, and to the discrimination they faced in entering schools and obtaining government jobs. Their hope was that they could escape social stigma by embracing a faith which preached equality for all its believers.[58]

VIII

To the historian, there are uncanny parallels between the first years of Mrs Gandhi's first term as prime minister and the first years of her second. These, like those, were years of trouble, and more trouble. Between 1966 and 1969 the Congress Party and the central government faced serious challenges from within the democratic system-as, for instance, the victories of the DMK in Madras and of the United Front in Bengal – and from without, such as the Mizo rebellion and the Naxalite insurgency. To add to all this, famine loomed large and there were serious scarcities of essential goods.

How Mrs Gandhi tackled that crisis we have already seen, our reconstruction aided by the colossal hoard of papers preserved by her principal secretary P. N. Haksar. By 1980 Haksar had left her, so there is no similar paper trail by which we can reconstruct the prime minister's response to this new crisis, caused by afresh wave of ethnic and regional movements, and by the intensification of communal conflict.

In 1969 and 1970, the route taken by Mrs Gandhi was ideological: the reinvention of herself as the saviour of the poor and the forging of a new party and of new policies to go with it. What path might she have taken now, had she P. N. Haksar by her side? Or what path might she have taken if Sanjay Gandhi were still alive?

Such speculation is, of course, academic. What we do know is that from late 1982 or thereabouts the prime minister had begun thinking seriously about her re-election. She did not want a repeat of that 1977 defeat. To avert the possibility she decided that, when the polls came, she would present herself as the saviour of the nation, safeguarding its unity against the divisive forces that threatened it.[59]

The non-Congress parties, meanwhile, were equally sensible of the next election, and the need to build a common front. Leading the unity moves was N. T. Rama Rao, who convened a meeting of opposition parties in Vijayawada in May 1983. In attendance was the new chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, son of Sheikh Abdullah, who had taken his father's job when the Sheikh passed away in 1982.

The prime minister was irritated by the NTR's initiative, and angered by Farooq's participation in it. When fresh elections were held to the Jammu and Kashmir state in 1983 she campaigned vigorously for her Congress Party. In speeches in the Hindu-dominated Jammu region she portrayed Farooq as a quasi-secessionist. The divide between Jammu and the Kashmir Valley had previously been presented in communal colours, but never before by an Indian prime minister. It was a

dangerous gambit, and it didn't work – Farooq and his National Conference were comfortably re-elected.[60]

Meanwhile, the conflict in the Punjab assumed dangerous proportions. The attacks on Hindu civilians grew more frequent. On 30 April 1984 a senior Sikh police officer, a particular scourge of the terrorists, was killed. Then, on 12 May, Ramesh Chander, son of the editor Jagat Narain and inheritor of his mantle, was also murdered. By now Bhindranwale's men had begun fortifying the Golden Temple, supervised by Shubeg Singh, a former major general of the Indian army, a one-time hero ofthe1971 war who had trained the Mukti Bahini.

Under Shubeg's guidance the militants began laying sandbags on turrets and occupying high buildings and towers around the temple complex. The men on these vantage points were all in wireless contact with Shubeg in the Akal Takht.An attack by government troops was clearly anticipated. The defences were prepared in the hope that they might hold out long enough to provoke a general uprising among Sikhs in the villages, and amass march towards the besieged temple. Enough food was stocked to last the defenders a month.

The other side too was preparing for action. On 31 May Major General R. S. Brar was summoned from Meerut, where he was in charge of an infantry division, and told he would have to lead the operation to rid the temple of terrorists. Brar was a Jat Sikh, whose ancestral village was but a few miles from Bhindranwale's. And he knew Shubeg Singh well – the latter had been Brar's instructor at the Indian Military Academy at Dehradun and they had worked together in the Bangladesh operations.

Brar was briefed by two lieutenant generals, Sundarji and Dayal. The government, he was told, believed that the situation in the Punjab had passed out of control of the civil administration. The centre's attempts to arrive at a settlement with Akalis had run aground. The Akalis had failed to convince Bhindranwale to dismantle the fortifications and leave the temple. And they were themselves getting more militant. The Akali leader Sant Longowal had announced that on 3 June he would lead a movement to stop the passage of grain from the state. A siege was considered, and rejected, because of the fear of a rebellion in the countryside. The prime minister had thus decided, 'after much reluctance', that the militants had to be flushed out. Brar was asked to plan and lead what was being called 'Operation Bluestar', with the mandate that it should be finished in forty-eight hours if possible, with no damage to the Golden Temple itself and with minimum loss of life.[61]

Within twenty-four hours of this briefing the army began moving into Amritsar, taking over control of the city from the paramilitary. On 2June a young Sikh office rentered the temple, posing as a pilgrim, and spentan hour walking around, carefully noting the preparations made for its defence. Patrols were also sent to study the vantage points occupied by the militants outside, which would have to be cleared before the assault.

On the night of the 2nd, the prime minister spoke on All-India Radio. She appealed to 'all sections of Punjab' not to 'shed blood, [but] shed hatred'. The call was disingenuous, since the army was already preparing for its assault. On the 3rd, Punjab's road, rail and telephone links were cut off, but in Amritsar itself the curfew was lifted to allow pilgrims to mark the anniversary of the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev.

The next day saw sporadic firing in the temple's perimeter as the army tried to knock out the towers occupied by the militants. That day and the next announcements were broadcast over loudspeakers asking pilgrims to leave the temple. The attack itself was launched on the night of the 5th. Brar's hope was that the peripheral parts of the temple would be seized by midnight, after which a lodgement would be placed within the Akal Takht, reinforcements sent up and the whole place

cleared by the morning of the next day. His plan grievously underestimated the number of militants, their firepower, their skill and their resolve. Every window in the Akal Takht had been boarded up, with snipers placed to fire through cracks from within. Other militants with machine guns and grenades were scattered through the complex, using their knowledge of its narrow passages and verandahs to launch surprise attacks on the advancing troops.

By 2 a.m. on the 6th the troops were a fair way behind schedule. Brar writes that 'due to intense multi-directional fire of the militants, our forces were unable to get close enough [to the Akal Takht] to achieve any degree of accuracy'.[62] Finally, permission from Delhi was requested to use tanks to break the defences. By dawn, several tanks – the estimates range from five to thirteen – had broken through the temple's gates and taken up position. Through much of the day they rained fire on the Akal Takht. In the evening it was deemed safe to send troops into the building to capture any defenders who might still remain. They found Shubeg Singh dead in the basement, still clutching his carbine, with a walkie-talkie next to his body. Also found in the basement were the bodies of Bhindranwale and his devoted follower, Amrik Singh of the All India Sikh Students' Federation.

The government estimated the death toll at 4 officers, 79 soldiers and 492 terrorists. Other accounts place the number of deaths much higher; at perhaps 500 or more troops, and 3,000 others, many of these pilgrims caught in the cross-fire.

'Notwithstanding the fact that by converting the House of God into a battlefield, all the principle sand precepts of the ten Sikh gurus were thrown overboard', remarks R. S. Brar, 'it must be admitted that the tenacity with which the militants held their ground, the stubborn valour with which they fought the battle, and the high degree of confidence displayed by them meritspraiseandrecognition.'[63] It is impossible not to sympathize with the writer of these words, whose own job was, without question, the most difficult ever assigned to an Indian army commander in peacetime or in war. The Sikh general to whom both Brar and Shubeg reported during the liberation of Bangladesh had this to say about Operation Bluestar: 'The army was used to finish a problem created by the government. This is the kind of action that is going to ruin the army.'[64]

IX

The Golden Temple is ten minutes' walk from Jallianawala Baghwhere, in April 1919, a British brigadier ordered his troops to fire on a crowd of unarmed Indians. More than 400 people died in the firing. The incident occupies a hallowed place in nationalist myth and memory; the collective outrage it provoked was skilfully used by Mahatma Gandhi to launch a countrywide campaign against colonial rule. Operation Bluestar differed in intent – it was directed at armed rebels, rather than a peaceable gathering – but its consequences were not dissimilar. It left a collective wound in the psyche of the Sikhs, crystallizing a deep suspicion of the government of India. The Delhi regime was compared to previous oppressors and desecrators, such as the Mughals, and the eighteenth-century Afghan marauder Ahmad Shah Abdali.[65] Are porter touring the Punjab countryside found a sullen and alienated community'. As one elderly Sikh put it, 'Our inner self has been bruised. The base of our faith has been attacked, a whole tradition has been demolished.' Now, even those Sikhs who had previously opposed Bhindranwale began to see him in a new light. For, whatever his past errors and crimes, it was he and his men who had died defending the holy shrine from the vandals.[66]

The view from outside the Punjab was quite different. Many people commended Mrs Gandhi for taking firm (if belated) action against terrorists claimed to be in the pay of Pakistan. The prime

minister herself was now prompted to move against elements in other states who were opposed to her. For some time now she had been pressing for the dismissal of Farooq Abdullah's government in Jammu and Kashmir. When the state's governor, her own cousin B. K. Nehru, told her it would be unconstitutional, he was replaced by Sanjay Gandhi's old lieutenant Jagmohan. In July 1984 Jagmohan engineered a split in the ruling National Conference and declared the leader of the rump faction the new chief minister. Bags of money were sent by the Congress Party in Delhi to bribe Kashmiri legislators into deserting their leader. Farooq was not given the opportunity to test his majority on the floor of the House. Indeed, the dismissal order was served on him in the middle of the night, as it had been on his father who, back in 1953, had likewise been sent out of office on grounds of dubious legality and still more dubious morality. As B. K. Nehru wrote, the Kashmiris 'were convinced now at the second dethronement of their elected leader that India would never permit them to rule themselves.'[67]

A month later a change of regime was effected in Andhra Pradesh. Once more the governor, a former member of the Congress Party, played a malevolent role. A section of the Telugu Desam was induced to break away and, with Congress support, form anewgovernment.[68] The dismissals of the J&K and Andhra chief ministers were in flagrant violation of democratic practice. These were not armed rebels but legally elected governments. One cannot rule out personal vindictiveness – it was NTR and Farooq, after all, who had first initiated the moves for opposition unity. The prime minister must also have calculated that it would help to have sympathetic regimes in place before the general election. Writing to a friend, she accused the opposition of having the 'single-minded objective of removing me'; their 'patchwork alliances', she claimed, were based on 'regionalism, communalism and casteism'.[69] It is tempting to turn the criticism on its head – certainly, many of Mrs Gandhi's own policies in 1983 and 1984 appear to have been dictated by the single-minded objective of winning the next general election.

In the aftermath of Operation Bluestar the prime minister had been warned by intelligence agencies of a possible attempt on her life. She was advised to change the Sikh members of her personal bodyguard. Mrs Gandhi rejected the suggestion, saying, 'Aren't we secular?'[70] On the morning of 31 October, while walking from her home to her office next door, she was shot at point-blank range by two of her security guards, Satwant Singh and Beant Singh. They were both Sikhs who had recently returned from a visit home, and been provoked by the hurt and anger they witnessed to take revenge for Operation Bluestar.

By the time the prime minister was admitted to hospital she was already dead. By early afternoon the foreign radio stations had put out the news, although All-India Radio made its own official announcement only at 6 p.m. Shortly afterwards her son Rajiv was sworn in as prime minister. When his mother was shot he was in Bengal; he rushedback to the capital, where agroup of senior Cabinet ministers and Congress leaders unanimously decided that he should succeed his mother.

Later that night some incidents of arson and looting were reported in Delhi. The next morning the body of Mrs Gandhi was placed in Teen Murti House, where her father had lived as prime minister. All through that day, and the next, India's sole television channel, Doordarshan, showed the line of mourners streaming past the body. From time to time the cameras focused on the crowds outside, who were shouting slogans such as '*Indira Gandhi amar rahe*' (Indira Gandhi shall be immortal) and, more ominously, '*khoon ka badla khoon se lenge*' (Blood will be avenged by blood).

The violence that began on the night of 31 October spread and intensified through the first two days of November. The first serious episodes occurred in south and central Delhi; later, the action

moved east across the river Yamuna, to the resettlement colonies located there. Everywhere it was Sikhs and Sikhs alone who were the target. Their homes were burnt, their shops looted, their shrines and holy books violated and desecrated. The mobs' deeds were accompanied by angry words: 'Finish off the Sardars', 'Kill the *gaddars* [traitors]', 'Teach a lesson to the Sikhs', were some of the slogans eyewitnesses reported hearing.

In Delhi alone more than a thousand Sikhs perished in the violence. Sikh males between eighteen and fifty years of age were particularly targeted. They were murdered by a variety of methods, and often in front of their own mothers and wives. Bonfires were made of bodies; in one case, a little child was burnt with his father, the perpetrator saying, '*Ye saap ka bachcha hai, isse bhi khatam karo*' (This offspring of a snake must be finished too).

The mobs were composed of Hindus who lived in and around Delhi: Scheduled Caste sweepers who worked in the city, and Jat farmers and Gujjar pastoralists from villages on the fringes. Often they were led and directed by Congress politicians: metropolitan councillors, members of Parliament, even Union ministers. The Congress leaders promised money and liquor to those willing to do the job; this in addition to whatever goods they could loot. The police looked on, or actively aided the looting and murder.[71]

Rajiv Gandhi's own comment on the riots was: When a big tree falls, the earth shakes'. Without question, the killing of Mrs Gandhi provoked strong feelings among her many admirers. Sections of the middle class venerated her for her conduct and leadership during the 1971 war; sections of the poor thought her the only Indian politician who empathized with their lot. And Hindus in general were dismayed at the happenings in the Punjab. The Khalistan movement, they believed, was aimed at tearing the country into pieces, and the fact that it was two Sikhs who had killed the prime minister seemed to confirm these fears. Immediately after Mrs Gandhi's killing rumours of other actions began to circulate. It was said that trains with dead bodies of Hindus were coming in from the Punjab, and that the capital's water supply had been poisoned by malcontents.

The public mood in Delhi was angry, distorted by happenings real and imagined. That said, Rajiv Gandhi's comment was still deeply insensitive. It was of apiece with the behaviour, overall, of the administration he was now asked to lead. By showing crowds baying for blood in Teen Murti House, state television was issuing a self-fulfilling prophecy. The police's indifference was shocking, the role played by Congress politicians positively immoral. But the lapse that perhaps signalled more than all the others was the unwillingness to call in the army. There is a large cantonment in Delhi itself, and several infantry divisions within a radius of fifty miles of the capital. The army was put on standby, but despite repeated appeals to the prime minister and his home minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, they were not asked to move into action. A show of military strength in the city on the 1st and 2nd would probably have quelled the riots – yet the order never came.

While Sikhs in the capital bore the brunt of the violence, there were also attacks on the community in other cities and towns of northern India. More than 200 Sikhs died in incidents in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Twenty Sikhs were killed in Indore, and as many as sixty in the steel town of Bokaro, where the mobs, as in Delhi, were led by local Congress politicians.

One city where the violence was minimal was Calcutta. There were 50,000 Sikhs resident in the city, many of them taxi-drivers, each one easily identified by his turban and beard. Very few were harmed; and not one died. The West Bengal chief minister, jyoti Basu, had ordered the police to ensure that peace be maintained. The instructions were honoured, with the city's powerful trade unions keeping a vigilant eye. The example of Calcutta showed that prompt action by the administration could forestall communal violence; a lesson, alas, lost to the rest of the country.[72]

X

Mrs Gandhi's impact on the history of her country was definitive; as definitive, indeed, as her father's. Jawaharlal Nehru was prime minister of India for sixteen years and nine months. His daughter served in that post almost as long, albeit in two stretches: from January 1966 to March 1977, and then again from January 1980 to October 1984. These are the two figures of pre-eminent importance in the history of independent India. To compare one to the other is inevitable, and perhaps also necessary.

As a military leader Mrs Gandhi was immeasurably superior. Her decisiveness at the time of the Bangladesh crisis was in striking contrast to Nehru's wavering attitude towards the Chinese: now promising undying friendship, now issuing threats with no force to back them. So far as economic policies went, Nehru's stress on the public sector and self-reliance was in keeping with the spirit of the age, whereas in the 1960s, when the time had come to cautiously open up the economy to market forces, Mrs Gandhi instead further strengthened the hold of the state. Socially, both were genuinely non-parochial, seeking to represent all Indians, regardless of their gender or class, or religious and linguistic affiliation.

Where the advantage rests squarely with Nehru is with regard to the processes and procedures of democracy. This point was made, after Mrs Gandhi's death, by Krishna Raj, the editor of India's leading journal of public affairs, the *Economic and Political Weekly*. One point of contrast was how father and daughter treated the party to which both owed a lifelong allegiance. When Indira Gandhi took charge in 1966, wrote Krishna Raj, 'she found a reasonably well-organised Congress party, with several layers of responsive leadership across the length and breadth of the country'. But she then '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.'

Tragically, it was not just the Congress Party that was made an extension of the prime minister's will. So was the government of India. Despite the ignominy of the China war, when Indira Gandhi came to power in January 1966 'India was a coherent nation, a nation marked by a quiet aura of social stability'. There was a set of socio-economic objectives around which it was united. The political class recognized the interconnection between means and ends. The 'faith was still widely shared that the paraphernalia of the state was never intended – at least not consciously intended – to be put to use for advancing private interests'. But by the time of Indira Gandhi's death there had been 'a qualitative transformation. India is a divided nation.' There were now 'deep wounds and deep dissensions'. The five-year plans, once acknowledged as 'an earnest statement of hopes and aspirations', now 'do not mean a thing'. Now, the 'apparatus of the state is all the time being manipulated for the sake of [the] fractional minority of the population at the top of the social hierarchy'. Now, the 'government at the centre is corrupt to the core and Indira Gandhi could not be absolved of direct responsibility for this state of affairs'.[73]

Sections of the Western press, meanwhile, saw dark days ahead for India. With Mrs Gandhi's death, wrote the *New York Times*, the country faced a 'period of prolonged uncertainty, with the potential for greater domestic instability and new tensions with its neighbours, particularly Pakistan'. The New York *Sun* was even more pessimistic, writing that the prime minister's assassination 'has opened a bleak possibility that India may fly apart, internally, and become increasingly the catalyst

for regional and global rivalries'. Some officials in Washington were worried that ethnic and religious rivalries would 'explode into general violence', that the country would fragment, and that 'a desperate leadership in India might look more and more to the Soviet Union for help'.[74]

This was not the first epitaph being written for the Union of India; nor would it be the last. Still, it is striking how, like the Congress sycophants, these Western observers appeared to think that Indira was, indeed, India. That this conclusion was reached provided further proof of the late prime minister's success in undermining the institutions that stood between her and the nation.