# THIS SON ALSO RISES

> In India the choice could never be between chaos and stability, but between manageable and unmanageable chaos, between humane and inhuman anarchy, and between tolerable and intolerable disorder.
>
> ASHIS NANDY, sociologist, 1990.

## I

EVEN BY THE STANDARDS of Indian politics, 1984 was an especially turbulent year. The first week of June witnessed Operation Bluestar, an unprecedented attack by the state on a place of worship. The last day of October saw the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the first major political killing since that of Mahatma Gandhi. That murder had temporarily brought a halt to Hindu-Muslim violence; this one provoked a wave of violence by Hindus on Sikhs.

It was against this bloody backdrop that Rajiv Gandhi was sworn in as prime minister. A month after he took office, the country witnessed a tragedy that claimed as many lives as had the anti-Sikh riots. In the early hours of 3 December 1984 white smoke began filling the air of the central Indian city of Bhopal. Citizens asleep in their homes were woken up with fits of coughing, vomiting and a burning sensation in the eyes. In panic they got out of bed and went out into the street, the gas cloud following them. By dawn, 'the main thoroughfares of the city were jammed with an unending stream of humanity, plodding its way in search of safer surroundings'. Many fell down in the streets, overcome by dizziness and exhaustion. Others found their way, somehow, to the city's few modern hospitals, whose beds were rapidly filled to capacity.[1]

The deadly gas was methyl isocyanate (MIC), and it came from a pesticide plant owned and run by an American firm, Union Carbide. Stored in underground tanks, it was usually rendered harmless by a scrubber before being released into the atmosphere. However, on this night an unanticipated chemical reaction led to the release of MIC in its toxic state. The effects were devastating. Within hours of the leak, at least 400 people had died of exposure to the gas. The final tally was in excess of 2,000, making it the worst industrial accident in human history. The bulk of the victims lived in the slums and shanty towns which ringed the factory. Apart from those who died, another 50,000 would be affected for the rest of their lives by illness and injury caused by exposure to the gas.

In the wake of the tragedy came a wave of visitors to Bhopal, not all of them welcome. There were doctors who came to help, but also lawyers seeking an avenue of profit through a 'class action' suit on behalf of the victims to be filed in an American court of law. The CEO of Union Carbide came, was briefly arrested, then released on bail and flown back to New York. Ten days after the accident a team of Indian scientists came to neutralize the stocks of MIC that still lay in the Carbide factory. The project was named Operation Faith, but it inspired only distrust. Fearing a fresh leak, thousands of residents made to leave Bhopal, with 'the city bus terminal and the railway station presenting] a chaotic scene ... as fleeing people swarmed them carrying their essential belongings'.[2]

Investigations into the leak suggested a range of possible causes: that water had got into the tank; that the tank had not been properly cleaned; that the MIC was being stored at temperatures higher than

recom-mended.[3] What was clear was that a potentially hazardous industry had no business to be in the city. Before the plant went into production in 1980, the town planner M. N. Buch recommended that Union Carbide choose a safer and less populated location. Indeed, as a report of June 1984 revealed, the history of the plant had been punctuated by gas leaks and burst pipelines – minor accidents, unacknowledged intimations of the major one that was waiting to happen.[4]

## II

The accident in Bhopal occurred in the first week of December. At the end of the month, India witnessed its eighth general election. The polls were dominated by the murder and memory of Indira Gandhi. The Congress campaign, overseen by the advertising agency Rediffusion, presented Rajiv Gandhi as the logical heir to his mother's legacy, and the party itself as the only bulwark against the forces of secession. 'India could be your vote away from unity or separation', ran the punchline of one ad featuring Rajiv. 'Will the cast of '77 ever be united by a common ideology instead of a common greed for power?' ran another.[5] The Congress campaign, wrote one commentator, capitalized on the growing mass insecurities', whereby 'Mrs Gandhi's assassination was equated in the public mind withan assault on the Indian State and that perception was constantly reinforced.'[6]

When the results came in, the Congress had swept the polls, capturing almost 50 per cent of the popular vote and almost 80 per cent of the seats in Parliament. Under the leadership of apolitical novice, the Congress won 401 seats, far more than they ever had under Nehru or Indira Gandhi. However, as one of the prime minister's advisers admitted, the victory was as much his late mother's as his own'.[7]

The general election had been won by stoking the fear of secession: but now, with a comfortable majority in hand, the prime minister moved swiftly to make peace in the Punjab. The leaders of the Akali Dal were let out of jail and emissaries sent to talk to them. Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal seemed as keen as Rajiv Gandhi to put the past behind him. In July 1985 the two leaders signed an accord, agreeing to transfer Chandigarh to Punjab within a specified time frame, assuring Punjab a fair share of river waters and committing the government to a fresh review of centre–state relations in general. President's Rule was to be revoked and state elections held.

Following the agreement, Sant Longowal toured the Punjab, speaking at public meetings and preaching in *gurdwaras*. Everywhere he asked that the people support the moves for reconciliation. While addressing a congregation in Sangrur, Longowal was shot dead by two young men, who held him to have betrayed the Sikh cause by breaking bread with the rulers in New Delhi. The incident occurred on 20 August; bravely, the government chose to go ahead with assembly elections in late September. The Sant's death created a wave of popular support for his party. The Akali Dal won a comfortable majority, for the first time in the province's history. With two-thirds of the adult population casting their ballots, the polls were interpreted as a vote against extremism.[8]

Meanwhile, at the other end of the country, the government also clinched an agreement with the All-Assam Students Union. The two sides agreed on cut-off dates for 'infiltrators': those who had arrived after 1 January 1966 but before 25 March 1971 (when the civil war in East Pakistan began)would be allowed to stay but not vote, while those who came later would be identified and deported. Here too President's Rule was ended and elections called. A student's union transformed itself into apolitical party, with AASU members creating the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). When polls to the state assembly were held in December 1985 the AGP trounced the once-dominant

Congress. The new chief minister, Prafulla Mahanta, was only thirty-two years of age; many of his legislators were even younger. As in Punjab, the result was hailed as a vindication of democracy. Senior Congress figures in Delhi argued that, while their party had lost, the Republic of India had won. 'Men who were distributing dynamite earlier were handling poll posters,' remarked one Union Minister: From a nationalistic point of view is that victory or defeat?'[9]

In June 1986 the government of India signed a peace agreement with Laldenga, leader of the Mizo National Front. By its terms, the MNF rebels laid down their arms and were granted an amnesty against prosecution. The government agreed to grant full statehood to Mizoram, and Laldenga himself assumed office as chief minister, taking over from the Congress incumbent. The model here was the Kashmir agreement of 1975, when Sheikh Abdullah had returned to power in a similar fashion.[10]

One journal remarked that Rajiv Gandhi 'had brought to the Mizos the goodwill of the nation'; as he had previously done to the Sikhs and the Assamese.[11] Although these agreements had actually been envisioned and drafted by officials – such as the veteran diplomat G. Parthasarathi – the credit accrued to the young prime minister, who was seen as standing above party rivalries in the interests of national reconciliation. In all three cases, parties or leaders opposed to the Congress had come to power through peaceful means.

## III

That Rajiv Gandhi was an outsider in politics was to his advantage. In the popular mind, 'his name was not associated with any controversial issues, he was not aligned to any caucus, and he had not yet created a coterie of his own'. His appeal was enhanced by his youth – he was still under forty in 1984 – his good looks, and his open manner. Here was a 'fine gentleman, thoroughly well-meaning, earnest and honest ... [H]is indulgent countrymen stuck the label "Mr Clean" on him'.[12]

Rajiv's main advisers also came from outside politics. They included Arun Singh and Arun Nehru, two friends from the corporate sector who were made ministers. Like him, they were young and English speaking. Like him, they were at ease with modern technology. They made manifest their intention to take India directly from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first, from the age of the bullock cart to the age of the personal computer. In some parts of the media the new recruits attracted derision or amusement, being known as 'Rajiv's computer boys'. In other parts they attracted approbation; here, Rajiv Gandhi was compared to John F. Kennedy, who had likewise 'symbolised youth and the hope of a new generation', assembling a 'team of the best and the brightest' to carve a new future for his land.[13]

In the first year of his term the prime minister was often on tour, making his acquaintance with parts of the country he had not previously seen. Rajiv Gandhi's 'Discovery of India' was appreciatively covered in the press, and on television. The 1980s had seen an enormous growth in the ownership of TV sets. With broadcasting still a state monopoly, the government channel, Doordarshan, shot and showed hundreds of hours featuring the young and handsome prime minister in the field: on a houseboat in Kashmir, in a remote tribal hamlet, among coconut trees in Kerala. Everywhere, he met ordinary Indians and received their petitions, passing them on to the district administration for action.[14]

The first crisis of the new regime was, in fact, caused by a petition. It had, however, been submitted not to the prime minister but to the Supreme Court of India. The petitioner was an elderly man named Mohammed Ahmed Khan, who wished to appeal against a lower court's decision

demanding that he pay monthly maintenance to his divorced wife, Shah Bano. Khan contended that he had fulfilled his duties by paying Shah Bano an allowance for three months, the period specified (he claimed) under Islamic law. In rejecting Khan's appeal, the Supreme Court invoked Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, whereby a divorced woman was entitled to claim an allowance from her ex-husband if he had taken another wife (as Khan had), and if she had not remarried and could not otherwise maintain herself (as was the case with Shah Bano). Section 125, noted the Court, 'was enacted in order to provide a quick and summary remedy to a class of persons who are unable to maintain itself. What difference would it then make as to what is the religion professed by the neglected wife, child or parent?' In their opinion, the explanations to the Criminal Procedure Code showed 'unmistakably, that Section 125 overrides the personal law, if there is any conflict between the two'.

M. A. Khan had first filed the appeal in 1981; it took four years for the case to come to judgement. Dismissing the appeal on 23 April 1985, the Supreme Court confirmed that Khan would have to continue to pay Shah Bano maintenance as fixed by the High Court (at the curious figure of Rs179.20 per month). Then the judges went beyond the specifics of the case to make some general remarks. They deplored the fact that Article 44 of the constitution, mandating a uniform civil code, 'has remained a dead letter'. They observed that 'a belief seems to have gained ground that it is for the Muslim community to take a lead in the matter of reforms of their personal law. A common civil code will help the cause of national integration by removing disparate loyalties to laws which have conflicting ideologies.'[15]

In some circles these remarks were taken as a gratuitous chastisement of the minority community as a whole. Muslims took exception to the judges, saying that 'it is alleged that the "fatal point in Islam is the degradation of women"'. (In fairness, they had also noted that the Hindu law-giver, Manu, believed that the woman does not deserve independence'). Muslim clerics criticized the judgement as an attack on Islam. Mosques up and down the country resounded with the voices of mullahs and maulvis denouncing Shah Bano and the Supreme Court judgement'.[16] On the other hand, some Muslim scholars supported the verdict, or at any rate held it to be not inconsistent with scripture, where there existed 'ample and respectable Islamic authority' for the proposition that the divorcing husband must provide maintenance until his ex-wife's death or remarriage.[17]

Three months after the Supreme Court judgement an MP named G. M. Banatwala moved a private member's bill in Parliament seeking to exempt Muslims from the purview of Section 125. The bill was opposed in the House by the minister of state for home affairs, Arif Mohammed Khan, representing, so to say, 'the progressive' Muslim point of view. He defended the Court's judgement by quoting Maulana Azad, who was at once the most famous nationalist Muslim and an acknowledged authority on the scriptures. The Maulana had written that the 'Quran takes occasion to re-emphasize that proper consideration should be shown to the divorced woman in every circumstance'. This call 'was based on the reason that she was comparatively weaker than [a] man and her interests needed to be properly safeguarded'. Further, argued Khan, we should have better practices these days and only if the down-trodden are uplifted, the Islamic tenets can be said to have been followed and justice done'.[18]

Arif Mohammed Khan had the support of the prime minister; with the Congress voting against it, the bill was defeated. However, the debate carried on outside the House. In her native Indore, the 75-year-old Shah Bano was denounced by conservatives as an infidel; demonstrations were held outside her house and neighbours were asked to ostracize her. On 15 November Shah Bano succumbed to the pressure, affixing her thumb impression to a statement saying that she disavowed the Supreme Court

verdict, that she would donate the maintenance money to charity and that she opposed any judicial interference in Muslim personal law.[19]

Towards the end of 1985 the Congress Party lost aseries of by-elections in northern India. Commentators saw a 'Shah Bano factor' at work, with rivals of the Congress 'whipping up religious fervour' by attacking the Supreme Court in constituencies with large Muslim popu-lations.[20] Reports of the alienation alarmed Rajiv Gandhi, who, within his party and Cabinet, began increasingly taking the advice of the conservative Z. A. Ansari rather than the liberal Arif Khan. In a three-hour speech in Parliament Ansari attacked the Supreme Court verdict as 'prejudiced, discriminatory and full of contradictions'. The judges, he added maliciously, were small men who were incompetent to interpret Islamic law'.[21]

By now, it was not merely Shah Bano who had succumbed to the pressure. The Congress itself had 'accorded recognition to fundamentalists as the sole spokesmen of their community'.[22] In February 1986 the government introduced a 'Muslim Women's Bill' in Parliament which sought to over turn the Supreme Court verdict, by taking Muslim personal law out of the purview of the Criminal Procedure Code. The bill placed the burden of supporting the divorced wife on her own relatives; all the husband was obliged to do was provide three months' maintenance. In May, the bill passed into law, with the Congress issuing a whip to its members to vote for it. Abandoned by his leader, his party and his government, Arif Mohammed Khan resigned, telling an interviewer that with this new legislation Indian Muslim women will be the only women to be denied maintenance anywhere in the world'.[23]

The controversy sparked by the Shah Bano case was in many ways a reprise of the debates over the reform of Hindu personal laws three decades previously. Then, too, attempts to enhance gender equity had been bitterly resisted by priests claiming to speak for the community as a whole. The claim was tested and found wanting, when Jawaharlal Nehru fought and won the 1952 elections on, among other things, the issue of the Hindu Code Bill.

Faced with a comparable situation in 1985–6, Rajiv Gandhi already had the support of 400 MPs. A reform of Muslim personal law to enhance the rights of women was comfortably within reach. So, even, was a gender-sensitive common civil code (as asked for by the constitution). What was lacking was a prime minister consistently committed to social reform. For as a high official in Rajiv Gandhi's government was to recall later, in the handling of the aftermath of the Shah Bano case the young P[rime] M[inister] was suddenly overwhelmed by the political system'. His initiatives in the Punjab and Assam had shown boldness and independence, but here, after first supporting the reformists, he had given way to the conservatives for fear of losing the Muslim vote. And so, 'Rajiv Gandhi the statesman started transforming himself into a politician'.[24]

## IV

Ten months after the Supreme Court handed down its verdict in the Shah Bano case, a judgement by a lower court provoked a controversy more furious still. On 1February 1986 the district judge of the town of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh, ordered that the locks be opened to permit worship at a small Hindu shrine. Despite its modest size this was a rather special place. It was located inside a large mosque, built as far back as the sixteenth century by a general of the Mughal emperor Babar (and hence known as the Babri Masjid). Moreover, it was claimed that the site was the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram, and that before the mosque was built, it had been home to a temple devoted to his

worship.

There is no evidence that the hero of the epic Ramayan was a historical character, but Hindu sentiment and myth widely held that he was, and that he had been born in Ayodhya at the very spot where the mosque was later built. The site was known locally as Ram Janmab-hoomi, literally, the piece of earth where Ram was born. Through the nineteenth century there were a series of clashes between rival groups claiming possession of the place. The British rulers then effected a compromise, whereby Muslims continued to worship inside the mosque, while Hindus made offerings on a raised platform outside.

Two years after India became independent in 1947 an official sympathetic to Hindu interests allowed an idol of the child Ram (Ram Lalla) to be placed inside the mosque. This was done under cover of darkness, and devotees were persuaded that it had appeared miraculously, a sign that the displaced deity wanted to reclaim his birthplace. Fresh tension broke out, defused only by an order allowing the worship of Ram Lalla on a single day in December. For the rest of the year, the idol was kept locked away from worshippers.

For three decades the status quo held until, in the early eighties, an organization named the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) began campaigning for the 'liberation of the spot where Ram was born'. The VHP brought under one banner hundreds of monks from the numerous old temples that dotted Ayodhya. Processions and public meetings were organized, where fiery speeches were made urging Hindus to free their god from 'a Muslim jail'. A local lawyer then filed a suit seeking public worship of the Ram idol. It was in response to this appeal that the district judge ruled that the locks be opened, and worship allowed.[25]

The judge's order was widely believed to have been directed from Delhi, from the Prime Minister's Office, no less. The local administration seemed to know of the judgement beforehand, for the locks were opened within an hour of the verdict. Remarkably, even the national TV channel was at hand to capture on camera the precise moment when devotees rushed into the newly opened shrine. There appeared to be a strong connection between the Muslim Women's Bill and the Ayodhya verdict. It was said that Rajiv Gandhi opened the locks on the advice of his colleague Arun Nehru, who thought the Congress now needed to compensate the chauvinists on the other side. A left-wing MP commented sarcastically that while the prime minister presented himself as a thoroughly modern man, striving to take India into the twenty-first century, in fact 'he has a mind as primitive as the *mullahs* and the *pandits'*.[26] Or, as the political analyst Neerja Chowdhury wrote, 'Mr Rajiv Gandhi wants both to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds'. If one act was aimed at the 'Muslim' vote, this other one seemed to target the far larger 'Hindu' vote. Chowdhury warned that 'a policy of appeasement of both communities being pursued by the government for electoral gains is a vicious cycle which will become difficult tobreak'.[27]

The opening of the locks emboldened the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. They now sought nothing less than the demolition of the mosque, and its replacement with a grand new temple dedicated to Ram. The VHP was working closely with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the older Hindu organization which was enjoying afresh lease of life. The RSS and VHP held meetings across India demanding that the 'majority' stand up for their rights. The Muslim Women's Bill was adduced as yet another example of the Congress government seeking to placate the minority. Only Hindus, it was alleged, were asked to disown their faith in this mistakenly 'secular' state. A new slogan was coined and broadcast: *Garv se kaho hum Hindu hain!* (Say you are a Hindu, and say it with pride.)

This message, as the weekly *India Today* wrote in May 1986, 'struck a high-strung emotional chord. Slowly but surely, like a juggernaut gaining angry momentum, a palpable, resurgent, united and

increasingly militant movement of Hindu resurgence is sweeping across the land'. Here was a movement that was 'revanchist', but which had also begun 'to smell the political power that comes with unity'.[28]

# V

It is possible to view the Hindu faith as a river with many tributaries, some that feed into a main stream and others that leave it. Perhaps the image itself is mistaken, for in many respects there is no main river at all. This is a religion that was decentralized like no other. Each district has its own holy shrines, each run by its own, locally revered priest. Sometimes the allegiances are to caste as well as region; Madhava Brahmins of, say, the Uttara Kannada district have their own chosen temple, and their own religious preceptor.

It was the Ayodhya controversy that opened up the possibilities of bringing these far-flung traditions together into a unified movement. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad had formed a Dharam Sansad (Faith Council) composed of the major *dharmacharyas* or leaders of Hindu sects. These in turn liaised with the lesser holy men, the thousands of *sants* and *sadhus* who each had a modest following of their own. Beyond the building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, these moves towards apan-Hindu unity had rich political possibilities. As one leading priest explained:

> There are dozens of *dharmacharyas* [in] Hindu society and each has a vote bank of approximately twenty-five *lakhs* (or 2.5 million). For example, there is Gujarat's sant Sri Murari Bapu, Rajasthan's Sri Ramsukh Dasji Maharaj, UP's sant Sri Devrah Baba, RSS's Sri Deorasji, Ayodhya's Sri Nrittya Gopal Dasji Maharaj, etc. Besides them there are hundreds of *dharmacharyas* who wield avote bank of at least one *lakh*. The Hindu society has about ten *lakh* strong team[s] of *sadhus*. *If* each mobilises a hundred people, the politics of this country would take a new turn and get hinduized.[29]

On the other side, the threats to the old mosque in Ayodhya had mobilized Muslim opinion in its defence. A Babri Masjid Action Committee was formed, which urged the state to prevent this and other Muslim shrines from being taken over by radical Hindus. In some sections of the community the mood was truculent. There were calls to allow worship in mosques controlled by the Archaeological Survey of India, and even a call to boycott the Republic Day celebrations if the government did not heed their demands.[30]

The growing Hindu consolidation was immeasurably helped by two contingent events. In September 1987 a young woman named Roop Kunwar committed ritual suicide in a village in Rajasthan, following her husband's death. Although sanctioned by Hindu tradition, *sati* had long been banned by law. While deplored by the state and, more actively, by feminist groups, Roop Kunwar's act inspired a groundswell of devotion in rural Rajasthan. A temple was built at the site of herself-immolation, attracting thousands of worshippers. Rallies were held hailing Roop Kunwar as an exemplar of Hindu womanhood in her devotion to her husband's memory.[31]

The other and more significant event was the telecast on Doordar-shan of anew, spectacular production of the Ramayan. Episodes were shown every Sunday morning, beginning in January 1987 and ending in July 1988. There were seventy-eight episodes in all, with the series interrupted by a

four-month break.

The *Ramayan* is a capacious epic, a story of love, sacrifice, heroism and betrayal, with plenty of blood and violence thrown in. It has a rich cast of minor and major characters, and lends itself well to soap-operatic treatment. And it was shown at a time when television viewership was rapidly increasing, with3 million new sets being sold every year.[32] Still, the success of the show exceeded all expectations. With an estimated 80 million viewers, 'city streets and marketplaces were empty on Sunday mornings. Events advertised for Sundays were careful to mention: "To be held after Ramayan". Crowds gathered around every wayside television set'. Hotels, hospitals and factories reported large-scale absenteeism on Sunday mornings.[33]

As much as the numbers of viewers, it is the intensity of their experience that merits attention. Rising early on Sunday mornings, viewers would take a ritual bath and make their prayers. Before the show began, television sets were garlanded and smeared with sandal-wood paste. Notably, the appeal of the serial cut across religious boundaries. Muslims watched it with pleasure and enchantment while churches rescheduled their services soastoavoidaclash.[34] As the anthropologist Philip Lutgendorf wrote, 'never before had such a large percentage of South Asia's population been united in a single activity, never before had a single message instantaneously reached so enormous [an] audience'.[35]

While Muslims and Christians watched the *Ramayana* for entertainment alone, for many Hindus delight was also mixed with devotion. By accident rather than design, the televised epic was introducing subtle changes in this pluralistic and decentralized religion, long divided into sects each worshipping different deities, lacking a holy book, a unique and singular god, or a single capital of the faith. Now, in front of their television sets, 'for the first time all Hindus across the country and at the same time listened to [and watched] the same thing: the serial in fact introduced a *congregational imperative* into Hinduism'.[36]

The *Ramayan* serial had been commissioned by state television independent of the happenings in Ayodhya. In the event, its appeal and influence contributed enormously to the VHP's movement to 'liberate' the birthplace of Ram. Hitherto one of many gods worshipped by Hindus, Ram was increasingly being seen, courtesy of the serial on television, as the most important and glamorous of them all.

# VI

One of the new prime minister's more daring departures was on the economic front. Rajiv Gandhi appointed as his finance minister V. P. Singh, a low-key politician from Uttar Pradesh with a reputation for integrity. The government's first budget, introduced in March 1985, sought to remove some of the controls and checks in what was one of the most tightly regulated economies in the world. The trade regime was liberalized, with duties reduced on a variety of import items and incentives provided for exporters. The licensing regime was simplified, with key sectors such as machine tools, textiles, computers and drugs deregulated. Curbs on assets of individual companies were partially lifted, and rates of corporate and personal income tax reduced. These changes, it was argued, would result in increased production and greater competitiveness. The Indian economy, said the prime minister in February 1985, had got 'caught in a vicious circle of creating more and more controls. Controls really lead to all the corruption, to all the delays, and that is what we want to cut out.'[37]

Left-wing intellectuals attacked the budget as pandering to the rich. Freeing the trade regime

would make India excessively dependent on foreign capital, they argued.[38] However, the new policies were welcomed by the business sector, and by the middle class.[39] This last sector of the population was by now quite large. Some estimates put their number as high as 100 million people. There was an expanding market for consumer durables, for items such as refrigerators and cars previously owned only by the select few. In 1984–5, the number of scooters and motorcycles sold increased by 25 per cent; the number of cars by as much as 52 per cent. New trades and businesses were opening all the time. There was a boom in the housing and real estate market and ever more restaurants and shopping complexes. The rising middle class, wrote one observer, had 'become the most visible sign of a rapidly progressing economy'.[40]

The latter half of the 1980s was a good time for Indian business. Industry grew at a healthy rate of 5.5 per cent per year, with the manufacturing sector doing even better, growing at 8.9 per cent per annum. Market capitalization rose from Rs68 billion in 1980 to Rs550 billion in 1989.[41] Naturally, some companies grew faster than others. The most spectacular rise was that of Reliance Industries, whose founder, Dhirubhai Ambani, had once been a lowly petrol pump attendant in Aden. Returning to India, he sets himself up in the spice trade before branching out into nylon and rayon exports. Then he turned to manufacturing textiles, before adding petrochemical factories, engineering firms and advertising agencies to his ever growing portfolio of interests.

Reliance witnessed growth rates unprecedented in Indian industry, and seldom seen anywhere else in the world. Through the 1980s the company's assets grew at an estimated 60 per cent per year, its sales at more than 30 per cent per year, its profits at almost 50 per cent. Ambani was an innovator, using state-of-the-art technology (usually imported), and raising money from the growing middle class by public issue (something which other Indian family firms were loath to do). Yet his company's rise owed as much to his skilful networking as to pure business acumen. He kept politicians and bureaucrats in good humour, throwing them parties and gifting them holidays. As a result, he often knew of impending policy changes – in tariff rates, for example – well ahead of the competition.[42]

Reliance's proximity to men in power was only one sign of a growing nexus between politicians and businessmen. Every large business house maintained lobbyists in Delhi, their job to 'stealthily work on politicians and bureaucrats to advance company interests'. Nor were these doings confined to the national capital; state ministers and chief ministers were alleged to be handing favours to industrialists in exchange for money. A particularly lucrative source of corruption was transactions in real estate. The law of eminent domain allowed the state to takeover farmland in the vicinity of towns at well below market rates, and then hand them over to favoured firms to build factories or offices. Hundreds of millions of rupees changed hand in these deals; some of the money going into the pockets of individual politicians, the rest into their party's treasury, to be used to fight elections.[43]

Their dealings with big money led to a profound change in the lifestyle of Indian politicians. Once known for their austerity and simplicity, they now lived in houses that were large and expensively furnished. Driving flashy cars and dining in five-star hotels, these were, indeed, the 'new maharajas'. The 'distance between Gandhi (Mahatma) and Gandhi (Rajiv)', remarked one observer, 'is a vast traverse in political ethic. The *dhoti* is out, so is the walking stick, wooden sandals and travelling in third-class railway compartments. Gucci shoes, Cartier sunglasses, bullet-proof vests, Mercedes Benz cars and state helicopters are in. Indian politics no longer smells of sweat, nor is it particularly clean and odourless – it reeks of aftershave.'[44]

# VII

While industry and the middle class prospered, large parts of India were witness to endemic poverty and malnutrition. In the autumn of 1985 a series of starvation deaths were reported from the tribal districts of Orissa. When the rains failed and the crops with them, villagers were forced to eat a gruel made of tamarind seed and mango kernel, a mixture that led in many cases to stomach disease. In earlier times the forests had provided food and fruit in times of scarcity; but with rampant deforestation that form of insurance was no longer available. More than 1,000 deaths were reported from the districts of Koraput and Kalahandi alone.[45]

In 1987 there was another and more serious drought. The uplands of Orissa were once more hard hit, but also suffering were the semi-arid parts of western India, the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan in particular. In desperation, pastoralists ferried their animals by truck to the rich forests of central India in search of fodder not available in their own home range. The drought was believed to be the worst of the century. An estimated 200 million people were affected by it, their suffering vividly captured in press photographs of parched and cracked land with carcasses of cattle strewn across it.[46]

The scarcities of 1985 and 1987 underlined the continuing dependence of the economy on the monsoon. Yet even in areas of irrigated agriculture there was discontent. This was stoked by two newly formed farmers' organizations: the Shetkari Sanghatana, active in Maharashtra; and the Bharatiya Kisan Union, based in Haryana and Punjab. The former was led by a one-time civil servant named Sharad Joshi, the latter by a Jat farmer named Mahindra Singh Tikait. According to Joshi, the main axis of conflict was between 'India', represented by the city-based, English-speaking middle class, and 'Bharat', represented by the villagers. He argued that economic policies had consistently favoured 'India' over 'Bharat'. To reverse this bias, Tikait and he proposed higher prices for farm produce, and lower tariffs for electricity for farm use. Both their organizations commanded a large base; each could rustle up 50,000 or more farmers to march on the state capital to press their demands.[47]

Although Joshi and Tikait claimed to speak for the rural population as a whole, in truth they represented the middle and rich peasantry, those who used tractors and electrified pump-sets and had a surplus to sell in the market. The poor were mostly outside their purview. As studies conducted in the 1980s once more confirmed, class strongly overlapped with caste in village India, where the truly disadvantaged continued to be the Harijans or Scheduled Castes (SCs). A survey in Karnataka revealed that nearly 80 per cent of SCs living in the countryside, as well as more than 60 per cent of SCs in towns, were below the official poverty line, their monthly expenditure less than Rs50 a month. The picture was much the same in other parts of India.[48]

# VIII

In his first year in office, Rajiv Gandhi had worked to resolve a series of ethnic conflicts – in Assam, in Mizoram, in the Punjab. By the end of his second year, however, his regime was confronted with fresh challenges based on the claims of ethnicity to add to the ongoing challenges based on religion and class.

As ever, a comprehensive coverage of social conflicts in this (or any other) decade in the history of independent India is beyond reach of a single chapter, book or scholar. One can only flag some of the more important ones. To begin with, there were conflicts between different groups in the same state. In Bengal, for instance, the Nepali-speaking population of the Darjeeling hills had begun asking

for a state of their own. Their leader was a former soldier named Subhash Ghisingh. Among his cadre Ghisingh commanded total and unquestioning support; at a word from him they could shut down all the schools and shops in the district. His Gorkha National Liberation Front worked within the democratic process and outside it, sometimes petitioning Union ministers, at other times engaging in pitched battles with the police. Through the latter half of 1986 the clashes were particularly intense. Eventually, the prime minister met Ghisingh, persuading him to accept an autonomous hill council rather than a state for Nepalispeakers.[49]

Across the border in Assam, the Bodo tribals were in revolt against the locally dominant Assamese. Their movement, mimicking their adversaries, was led by young men of the All-Bodo Students Union (ABSU). ABSU leaders wanted a separate state to be carved out of Assam, in pursuit of which they blockaded roads, burnt bridges and attacked non-Bodos. When the Assamese radicals retaliated the clashes became violent, claiming dozens of lives.[50]

In Tripura, meanwhile, tribal activists had launched a struggle against the Bengalis who had migrated in large numbers to the state after Partition. By some definitions the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) qualified as 'terrorists', murdering and kidnapping civilians and ambushing police parties in pursuit of their ends. In 1986 TNV guerrillas killed more than a hundred people. In the next year their tally was even higher. However, in August 1988 the TNV leader Bijoy Hrangkhawl came out of hiding to sign an accord with the government. His volunteers laid down their arms in exchange for more seats for tribals in the local legislature and the provision of rice and cooking oil at subsidized rates in tribal villages.[51]

A second set of conflicts pitted residents of individual states against the Union government. Thus in Punjab, the euphoria generated by the Rajiv Gandhi-Longowal accord proved to be a highly temporary phenomenon. The *sant*'s assassination was a harbinger of things to come, with a new generation of terrorists taking up the struggle for Khalistan. The injuries caused by Operation Bluestar and the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi had brought many fresh recruits to the cause. So had the failure of the central government to honour its commitment to transfer Chandigarh to Punjab. Militants were once more making their home in the Golden Temple. Statements in favour of Khalistan were being made by priests and, on occasion, by members of the ruling Akali Dal itself.[52]

To tackle the resurgence of terrorism the police force in Punjab was now 34,000 strong. To stiffen its morale a new chief was brought in: a plain-speaking Bombay policeman named J. F. Ribeiro. Also recruited, a little later, was K. P. S. Gill, a Sikh by extraction who had experience fighting extremism in the north-east. Ribeiro and Gill adopted a carrot-and-stick policy; meeting Sikh peasants in an extensive 'mass contact' programme on the one hand, forming vigilante groups to eliminate terrorists on the other. Police parties fanned out into the countryside, mounting search operations, firing at men on the run. Dozens of extremists were killed in these searches, but there was also much harassment of ordinary villagers.[53]

But the acts of terror continued. Buses were stopped on the highway, Hindu passengers separated from Sikhs and killed. In 1986 there were twice as many killings as there had been in 1984, when Bhindranwale was alive. In panic, many Hindus began fleeing across the border to Haryana.

To get rid of the minorities in the Punjab was indeed one of the terrorists' aims. Another aim was more sinister; to instil fear in Sikhs who lived *outside* the Punjab. To this end a series of bombs were setoff in markets and bus terminals in Delhi and other towns of northern India. These were intended to provoke a fresh round of revenge killings against the Sikhs. Then the Sikhs who survived might come back to the Punjab, there to form a consolidated, unified, homogeneous community, the better to fight the battle for Khalistan. The model, apparently, was the successful struggle for Pakistan

back in the 1940s, which had likewise been helped by creating panic among Muslims living outside the holy land.[54]

In a major operation in May 1988 commandos flushed out some fifty terrorists holed up in the Golden Temple complex. Unlike Operation Bluestar, this assault was launched in daylight, so that the adversaries could be pinpointed more clearly. In any case, these militants were not as well prepared or as motivated as Bhindranwale's men. They retreated into the Temple's *sanctum* sanctorum; denied access to food and water, they surrendered seventy-two hours later.[55]

The revival of terrorism in the Punjab coincided with renewed trouble in another border state, Jammu and Kashmir. Back in 1984, Mrs Gandhi had Sheikh Abdullah's son Farooq removed from office; now her son Rajiv restored the ties that once bound the two families and their respective parties, the Congress and the National Conference. In November 1986 they together formed a caretaker government in the state. Justifying the alliance, Farooq Abdullah said that 'the Congress commands the Centre. In a state like Kashmir, if I want to implement programmes to fight disease and run a government, I have to stay on the right side of the Centre.'[56]

In 1987 fresh elections were held to the Jammu and Kashmir assembly. To fight them, Kashmiri politicians seeking autonomy from the centre – rather than dependence or subservience – formed an umbrella grouping named the Muslim United Front (MUF). MUF workers were harassed by the administration; and the polls themselves were anything but free and fair. Although the National Conference–Congress alliance would probably have won anyway, their margin of victory was made much greater by the rigging of votes in their favour. Even the Intelligence Bureau conceded that as many as thirteen seats were lost by the MUF owing to 'electoral malpractice'.[57]

The way the 1987 elections were conducted led to deep disenchantment among political activists in Kashmir. Despairing of being treated fairly by New Delhi, they began looking to Pakistan for succour. Groups of young men crossed the border, joining training camps run by the Pakistani army. A year later they crossed back, to put into practice what they had learned. In the spring of 1989, the Kashmir Valley was witness to a series of shootings, bomb blasts and grenade attacks. This lovely valley was now home to 'Kalashnikovs, detonators, Molotov cocktails, gelatine fuses, mortars [and] masked militants'. Ninety-seven separate incidents of violence were recorded in the first half of 1989, in which at least 52 people were killed and 250 injured. Kashmir, commented one reporter grimly, 'appears to have the makings of another Punjab'.[58]

# IX

Even as the Indian government was trying – with mixed success – to contain secession at home, it had embarked on an ambitious attempt to end ethnic strife in neighbouring Sri Lanka. That little island – as beguilingly beautiful in its own way as mountainous Kashmir – was caught in a bloody civil war between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority. The causes of the conflict were wearyingly familiar, to Indians at any rate, for they involved rival claims of language, ethnicity, religion and territory.

A detailed history of the Sri Lankan conflict would take us too far afield.[59] Suffice it to say that it really began when Sinhala was imposed as the sole 'official language' of the island nation. The Tamils asked for parity for their own tongue and, when this was denied, took to the streets in protest. Over the years, non-violent methods were thrown over in favour of armed struggle.

Of the several Tamil resistance organizations, the most influential and powerful were the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Led by a brutal fighter named Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE had as its aim a separate nation, to be constituted from the north and east of the island, where the Tamils were in a majority. Throughout the early 1980s they mounted raids on Sri Lankan army camps and committed atrocities on civilians. The Sinhala response was, if anything, even more fierce. This was, in other words, a conflict of an almost unspeakable brutality and savagery.

LTTE fighters had long used the Indian state of Tamil Nadu as a safe haven. Their activities were actively helped by the state government, with New Delhi turning an indulgent blind eye. However, in the summer of 1987 Rajiv Gandhi was asked by the Sri Lankan President, J. R. Jayawardene, to help mediate in the conflict. Under an agreement signed between Colombo and New Delhi, an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) would be flown into the island. The Sri Lankan army would retreat to the barracks, and the LTTE militants persuaded – or forced – to disarm.

In late July 1987 Indian troops began going to Sri Lanka in batches of a few thousand. (Eventually, as many as 48,000 soldiers of the Indian army would be stationed there.) Their presence was unpopular among Sinhala nationalists, who saw it as an infringement of sovereignty, and among the Tamils, who had always thought that India was on their side. When asked to surrender their arms, the LTTE insisted on a series of preconditions, including the release of all Tamil prisoners in government custody and a halt to Sinhala colonization in the east of the island. Until October an uneasy peace held, broken when the IPKF moved against the militants. The LTTE headquarters in Jaffna was stormed and captured, but at an enormous cost. Popular opinion turned decisively against the Indians, who were now seen as an occupying force. The LTTE took to the jungles, from where they would snipe and harry the Indians. They made particularly effective use of land mines, blowing up convoys of soldiers as they travelled on the roads.

By the end of 1987 the press was writing of Sri Lanka as 'India's Vietnam'. For 'the Indian army had never seen a war like this: in an alien land, against a foreign enemy that wore no uniforms, knew no Geneva Convention on ethics of war, yet carried deadly modern weapons and fought routinely from behind the cover of women and children'.[60] An Indian commander was slightly more generous: while deploring the LTTE's 'senseless, mulish, destructive insistence' on armed struggle, he nonetheless saluted their discipline, dedication, determination, motivation and technical expertise'.[61]

As the bodies of dead soldiers were returned in bags to the mainland, pressure mounted to recall the living. From the summer of 1989 they began coming back, although the final pull-out was not accomplished until the spring of 1990. More than 1,000 Indian soldiers had died in the conflict.

The decision to send in troops to Sri Lanka was consistent with India's growing perception of itself as the 'rightful regional hegemon in South Asia'.[62] In demographic and economic terms it dominated the region, and it was now determined to express this dominance in terms of military preparedness as well. In January 1987 Indian infantry units mounted a large exercise on the Pakistan border, ostensibly to test new equipment but really to display to the old enemy a new-found power.[63] Then, in March 1988, India tested its first surface-to-surface missile, capable of attacking targets up to a distance of a hundred miles away. A year later it successfully tested amore sophisticated device, which could carry a load ten times more powerful and reach targets 1,500 miles away. Indian missile scientists had taken their country into an exclusive club whose only other members were the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, China and Israel.[64]

These developments attracted apprehension in the smaller countries of South Asia. People were talking of the 'Ugly Indian', as they talked in other parts of the world of the 'Ugly American'. India, admitted a Calcutta weekly ruefully, is regarded as the bad boy of the region'.[65]

# X

Rajiv Gandhi had come to power with a massive mandate in the polls held after his mother's death. As the general election of 1989 approached, however, the prospects for his party were decidedly uncertain. As in 1967 and 1977, now too the once regnant Congress was being hard pressed to maintain its position.

There was, first of all, the ever more serious challenge of regional parties. Through much of Rajiv Gandhi's tenure the Asom Gana Parishad had ruled in Assam, the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh (where N. T. Rama Rao had come back to power in 1985), and the Akalis in the Punjab. In January 1989 the DMK was returned to power in Tamil Nadu. More robustly placed than all these parties was the CPM in West Bengal, which in 1989 had been in office for twelve years. In this time their leader and chief minister Jyoti Basu had 'grown phenomenally in stature'. Basu was held in great esteem in the countryside for the agrarian reforms his party had brought about. Unusually for a communist, he was also respected by industrialists, who admired his pragmatic approach to investment and his tempering of trade union militancy.[66]

A second challenge came from the Hindu right. The old Jana Sangh, since renamed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had won a mere two seats in the 1984 elections. But it had now hitched its wagon to the campaign for a Ram temple in Ayodhya. As that movement gathered popularity, so the party's fortunes rose. BJP cadres joined VHP and RSS workers in carrying out Ram *shila pujans*, ceremonies to worship and consecrate bricks which, they hoped, would be used in the construction of the Ram temple. To force the issue, the VHP announced that it would organize a formal *shilanyas* (foundation ceremony) at the disputed site in Ayodhya on 2November. Bricks from different districts reached the site on the appointed day. The Congress government in Delhi was advised to stop the *shilanyas*, but eventually let it go ahead for fear of offending Hindus ahead of the general Election. The VHP chose a Dalit labourer from Bihar to lay the first brick of what they claimed would, one day soon, be a glorious temple dedicated to Lord Ram.[67]

The brick worship ceremonies led to religious conflict in several towns in northern India. The worst hit was the city of Bhagalpur, in Bihar, where Hindus and Muslims battled each other for a whole week in November. The conflict spilled over into the countryside, where RSS activists led groups in the smashing of looms and homes owned by the region's celebrated Muslim weavers. Several hundred Muslims died and many more were rendered homeless. These were gathered into relief camps run not by the government, but by Muslim merchants and Islamic relief organizations. The riots in Bhagalpur, and the aftermath of the Ram *pujans* generally, further polarized the communities. The Muslims felt betrayed by the Congress, while a large section of the Hindu middle class was drawn into an open support of the BJP.[68]

A third challenge to the prime minister came from his erstwhile Cabinet colleague V. P. Singh. As finance minister, Singh had conducted a series of raids on industrial houses accused of tax evasion. This was seen as exceeding his brief; he was shifted to the Defence portfolio, and later dropped from the Cabinet altogether. Not long afterwards a storm broke out over revelations that commissions had been paid to middlemen in a deal involving the sale of the Swedish Bofors gun to the Indian army. The news was first announced over Swedish radio in April 1987. Over the next two years the press and opposition politicians kept up the pressure on the government, demanding that it name and punish the offenders. The government stonewalled, prompting speculation that the middlemen were somehow linked to the prime minister himself. The fact that there had been

corruption in a defence transaction provoked widespread outrage, which was further intensified when it emerged that army experts had preferred a French gun to the Bofors, but had been overruled by the politicians.[69]

In the public mind, the Bofors controversy was, rightly or wrongly, linked to the departure of V. P. Singh from the Cabinet. The appellation 'Mr Clean' was transferred from Rajiv Gandhi onto him. Singh left the Congress, and in June 1988 stood and won as a candidate of the combined opposition in a parliamentary by-election in Allahabad. By now he had become the focal point of a growing anti-Congress sentiment. In October 1988 his Jan Morcha was merged with the old Janata Party to form the Janata Dal. This new party then joined hands with regional groupings to create a National Front, launched at Madras's Marina Beach and hailed by one of its members, the ever-ebullient N. T. Rama Rao, as a chariot 'drawn by seven horses [that] will dispel the gloom and shadows that thickened through the passage of the last few decades of national history'.[70]

In the last year of his government's tenure Rajiv Gandhi embarked on four initiatives that aimed at reversing his declining popularity. In September 1988 he introduced a bill aimed at checking the freedom of the press. Under its terms, editors and proprietors could be sent to jail if they were guilty of 'scurrilous publication' or 'criminal imputation', terms whose definition would be the privilege of the state alone. The bill was evidently a response to the spate of recent stories on corruption; it was a 'belated preemptive strike before more damage could be done to the government's image'. It prompted a collective protest by editors across the country and a walk-out in Parliament, and was eventually dropped.[71]

Then, in January 1989, Rajiv Gandhi visited China, the first Indian prime minister to do so in more than three decades. This was, among other things, an attempt to recast himself as an international statesman. In talks with Chinese leaders the border question was delicately sidestepped. However, New Delhi ceded ground on Tibet, while Beijing for its part said it would not aid insurgents in India's north-east. Rajiv Gandhi had a ninety-minute conversation withthe84-year-old Deng Hsiao Ping, where he was told: 'You are the young. You are the future.'[72]

Next, in March 1989, Rajiv Gandhi reversed the outward-looking, growth-oriented economic policies of his first years in office. In the last budget tabled by his government he increased taxes on consumer durables and introduced fresh surcharges on air travel and luxury hotel bookings. At the same time, a new employment generation scheme was introduced for rural areas. With the elections beckoning, Rajiv Gandhi was 'going back to the kind of populism that his mother specialized in'.[73]

Finally, in the summerof1989, the government launched a series of high-profile events to celebrate the birth centenary of Jawaharlal Nehru. Seminars, photo exhibitions, TV quizzes, poetry festivals, musical concerts, even skating competitions, were held in Nehru's name, all paid for by the state and publicized by state radio and television. On the face of it, these programmes merely honoured India's first prime minister, but at another, more subconscious level, the blitz repeatedly and subtly whispers the real but hidden message: that there has been no better guardian of the nation than the Nehru family and letting the family down would, in the ultimate analysis, amount to spurning a sacred legacy and inviting the forces of chaos'.[74]

Still, Rajiv Gandhi was leaving nothing to chance. In his campaign for re-election he addressed 170 meetings in different parts of the country. As in 1984, he was advised by Rediffusion to stress the threats to the country's unity, stoked and furthered by a sectarian opposition and to be overcome by the Congress alone.[75] This time, however, the message did not resonate nearly as widely. For one thing, the accusations of corruption had gravely hurt the government's credibility. For another, the opposition was far better organized. The three main groupings had co-ordinated their strategy so that

in most constituencies the Congress candidate faced only one main opponent – from either the National Front, the BJP, or one of the communist parties.

The elections, held in November 1989, were a body blow to the Congress Party. They won only 197 seats, down more than 200 from their previous tally. On the other hand, the opposition couldn't quite claim victory either. The Janata Dal won 142 seats, the BJP 86, and the left a few more than fifty. V. P. Singh was sworn in as head of a National Front government, with the left and the BJP choosing to support it from outside. Thus, the second non-Congress prime minister of India was someone who, like the first (Morarji Desai), had spent the bulk of his political career in the Congress Party.

The general election of 1989 was the first in which no single party won a majority. That it constituted a watershed is not merely a retrospective reading; some observers had called it so at the time. 'India was in for a period of political instability', wrote Vir Sanghvi: 'The days of strong governments ruled by dictatorial Prime Ministers were over. This election was the inauguration of an era of uncertainty.' [76]

# XI

Even by the standards of Indian history, the 1980s were an especially turbulent decade. The republic had always been faced with dissenting movements; but never so many, at the same time, in so many parts of India, and expressed with such intensity. Two challenges were especially worrying: the continuing insurgency in Punjab – the first such in a state considered part of the *heartland* of India (unlike those old trouble spots Nagaland and Kashmir) – and the unprecedented mobilization of radical Hindus across the country, which threatened the identity of the secular state. Adding to the violence, major and minor, was the growing political and administrative corruption, this highlighted but also made more troubling by an alert press. Outside the country's borders national prestige had been greatly damaged by the bloody nose given to the Indian army by the LTTE in Sri Lanka.

In the summer of 1985 the Calcutta weekly Sunday, then at the height of its importance and influence, ran a cover story on the 'uncontrollable wave of violence' in the country. 'Tension and frustration everywhere – social, economic and political', said the weekly, was giving way to sporadic terror and mass protests'. 'Acts of sabotage, arson, killings and destruction are breaking out all over India like an ugly rash.' Thirty-seven years after Independence, 'India finds itself at a crucial point in its history'.

Posing the question 'What is happening to the country and why?', *Sunday* asked a roster of eminent Indians to answer it. The editor Romesh Thapar remarked that the violence and anger showed that 'no one is in command at anylevel . . . [T]he fear is growing that we are moving beyond the point of no return, to use a phrase from the jargon of airline pilots. The breakdown is becoming too visible.' The columnist Kuldip Nayar reproduced a series of newspaper headlines on riots and killings, these recording 'trouble of varying intensity in areas thousands of miles apart', the work of people who 'for along time lived on the edge of disaster' but whose 'discontent seems [now] to have reached a bursting point'. The policeman K. F. Rustomji noted grimly that Indian politics and administration were now captive to the 'fanatic and the demagogue', who 'claim the right to organise the deaths of thousands under the guise of democratic dissent'. 'Forget the dead, count the votes, said Rustomji in a withering but not in accurate characterization of the political purpose of those fanatics and demagogues. Then he added, 'In a few years even the votes may not be worth counting because

we may have killed democracy by then.'[77]

These were recurrent themes in the press commentary of the period: that India would break up into pieces, or give up on democracy altogether. Writing in April 1987, *Sunday's* own political editor Kewal Verma issued this dire warning:

> If Rajiv Gandhi continues to slip and no alternative emerges (. . .none is in sight yet), it will lead to political destabilisation with disastrous consequences. For, Khalistan could become a reality. Already in the rural areas of Punjab, Sikh extremists are running a parallel administration. Also, the Rama Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue could lead to large-scale communal war in north India. A prolonged state of political uncertainty and instability would be an invitation to adventurous forces to intervene in the situation. For instance, if the President dismisses the Prime Minister, it may be [the Chief of Army Staff] Gen. Sundarji who will decide who should stay.[78]

The writers quoted in this section were all Indians in their late fifties or early sixties, who had grown up in the warm glow of the Nehru years and remembered the hopes with which the new nation was forged. Their sentiments were no doubt coloured by nostalgia, at least some of which was merited. For the politicians of Nehru's day had worked to contain social cleavages rather than deepen or further them for their own interests. But in other ways the nostalgia was perhaps misplaced. The churning – violent and costly though it undoubtedly was – could be more sympathetically read as a growing decentralization of the Indian polity, away from the hegemony of a single region (the north),a single party (the Congress), a single family (the Gandhis).

One must reserve final comment on whether the gloom was really justified. For as the very many forecasts previously quoted in this book have shown, every decade since Independence had been designated the 'most dangerous' thus far. If there was a novelty about these latest predictions, it was merely that they came from Indians rather than foreigners.

# XII

With the end of the present chapter, this book moves from 'history' to what might instead be called 'historically informed journalism'. Part Five, which follows, deals with the events of the last two decades, that is, with processes still unfolding. Given our closeness to what is being written about, it adopts a thematic rather than chronological approach. To ground the narrative, however, each chapter starts with a prediction from the past that in some way anticipated the future.

The author of a study of the Assam movement published in 1983 remarked that the book was 'almost contemporary history and contemporary history will not have the logic, the neatness in understanding, the conformity to patterns, that the passage of years gives to things'.[79] The author of a book on Operation Bluestar published in 1994 argued that a decade or so is perhaps the right amount of time to have elapsed before attempting to document contemporary history. It is also the time when one can indulge in the luxury of introspection because events have ceased to colour one's judgement emotionally'.[80]

Most official archives around the world follow a 'thirty-year' rule, keeping closed documents written during the past three decades. That seems just about right, for once thirty years have passed

any new ‘disclosures’ are unlikely materially to affect the lives of those still living.

In my experience, to write about events as a historian one also needs a generation’s distance. That much time must elapse before one can place those events in a pattern, to see them away and apart from the din and clamour of the present. Once roughly three decades have gone by, much more material is at hand – not just archives that are now open, but also memoirs, biographies and analytical works that have since been published.

When writing about the very recent past one lacks the primary sources available for earlier periods. Besides, the historian is here writing about times that are close to him as well as his readers. He, and they, often have strong opinions about the politicians and policies of the day. In the chapters that follow I have tried to keep my own biases out of the narrative, but my success in this respect may be limited – or at any rate, more limited than in other parts of the book. For these decades have been as rich in incident and controversy as any other time in the history of independent India.