Run-up to the New Millennium and After

Rajiv Gandhi had succeeded in placing the idea of preparing for the twenty-first century—the first century of the new millennium—in the minds of thinking Indians. When he asked for a mandate for the second time in November 1989, there was just a decade to go for the ambitious targets he had set before the nation, and which he hoped to have the opportunity to pursue. But running a government and winning an election are two different propositions and success in one is no guarantee of success in the other. Despite unprecedented economic growth, averaging around 5.5 per cent per annum, the highest expenditure ever on antipoverty programmes, an almost flawless handling of the drought of 1987, significant foreign policy achievements, the 'hawa' or wind blew in the opposite direction. V.P. Singh's single-minded crusade against corruption, which he had carried on unremittingly since his expulsion from the Congress in 1987, had touched a sensitive chord. Corruption at the lower levels of the bureaucracy was an issue of everyday concern for all citizens, rich or poor, and it was widely felt that high-level corruption created conditions of legitimacy for the lower-level variety. V.P. Singh courted and won the support of a wide range of forces, which included Sarvodaya workers, trade unionists such as Datta Samant, the farmers' movement led by Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra, and some sections of radical anti-Congress intellectuals.

Apart from choosing an emotive issue, V.P. Singh also fashioned a consummate political strategy for isolating Rajiv and Congress. He first joined together with all those Congressmen who had become estranged with Rajiv for one reason or another. Among these was Arif Mohammad Khan, a young secular Muslim leader considered close to Rajiv. Arif had achieved instant fame by resigning on the issue of the Shah Bano case. This case, in which the Supreme Court granted maintenance to a Muslim woman divorced by her husband, became controversial because it was opposed by orthodox Muslims on the grounds that it interfered with the Muslim personal law. Arif, encouraged by Rajiv, had put up a brilliant defence of the judgement in parliament, but was dismayed and resigned his ministership when Rajiv, coming under enormous pressure from a powerful agitation and close advisers, agreed to introduce a bill to negate the judgement. Rajiv's stand on the Shah Bano case had first cost him Muslim support and, once he changed his mind, Hindu support as well, since he was seen as appeasing Muslims. In many ways, Arif's resignation was the beginning of the turnaround in Rajiv's fortunes. Arif was joined in the wilderness by Arun Nehru, the estranged cousin whom Rajiv had edged out when he seemed to be becoming too powerful and inquisitive as Minister of State for Home. V.P. Singh, Arif and Arun Nehru, joined by Ram Dhan, V.C. Shukla, Satpal Malik and other Congress dissidents, formed the Jan Morcha, or People's Front, on 2 October 1987. With this as the core, V.P. Singh began to build an anti-Rajiv political bloc.

He placated the left parties by calling them his natural allies and issuing statements against communalism, but made sure he had the BJP on his side by speaking from their platform and maintaining close links with Vajpayee and Advani. However, more than V.P. Singh's strategy, it was the inherent anti-Congressism of the left and the BJP that brought them to support V.P. Singh.

His resounding victory in the Allahabad by-election in June 1988 against Congress, in which the Bofors gun had become the unofficial campaign symbol, had convinced them that he was the answer to their anti-Congress prayers. And though the left parties were always quick to deny any truck with the BJP, especially when it became clear later that the BJP was the main beneficiary of the electoral understanding in the 1989 elections, it is a fact that they were fully aware of V.P. Singh's dealings with the BJP. Citing Jyoti Basu's presence at a public rally held to felicitate V.P. Singh for his victory in the Allahabad by-election, in which he shared the dais with Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the BJP, V.P. Singh's biographer, Seema Mustafa, says: 'That V.P. Singh alone was not responsible for the "understanding" reached with the BJP and that it had the covert support of the Left becomes clear from this move. Indeed, eventually the Left parties told VP that they would not make an issue of any electoral agreement with the BJP, although they would not be able to support it openly.'[1]

The feeling among the left and V.P. Singh was that, as in 1977– 79, the BJP would not be able to gain much as it did not have any independent strength. The BJP, on the other hand, went along, often swallowing insults that a party with less discipline would have found impossible to get its cadre to tolerate, in the conviction that the dislodging of Congress was a necessary step on its road to power. The association with left and secular forces gave it the credibility it lacked by removing the stigma of communalism that had ensured it remained on the fringes of Indian politics—a stigma that had been attached to it by the efforts of secular nationalists since the days of the freedom struggle. The BJP increased its tally from 2 in 1984 to 86 in 1989, and this jump put it on the path to power, which it achieved in 1998. To quote, 'The broad alliance [formed in 1989] was definitely one of the factors responsible for the rise of the BJP.'[2]

The strategy for Opposition unity was conceived as a three-stage process. The first stage was the unity of centrist non-Congress secular national parties, the second the formation of a National Front of all non-left secular parties, regional and national, and the third the seat adjustments with left parties and the BJP. The second stage was completed first, with the National Front of seven parties being formed on 6 August 1988. On 11 October 1988, the birthday of Jayaprakash Narayan, the Janata Dal was formed with the merger of the Jan Morcha, Congress(S), Janata and Lok Dal. The third stage was reached when the Janata Dal-led National Front and BJP agreed not to contest against each other in around 85 per cent of the seats where the two would have otherwise nominated candidates, and a similar arrangement for a smaller number of seats was reached between the National Front and the Communist parties.

The National Front Government, 1989–1990

The election results were a blow to Congress even if it was still the single largest party with 197 seats and 39.5 per cent vote share. Rajiv made it clear that Congress was not interested in trying to form a government. With the left parties and the BJP quickly declaring that they would support a National Front government from the outside, the stage was set for the second non-Congress government in post-independence India to take office. The National Front had won 146 seats and was supported by the BJP with 86 and the left parties with 52 seats.

The beginnings were not smooth, however, with Chandra Shekhar totally opposed to V.P. Singh as prime minister, and Devi Lal insisting he be made deputy prime minister at least. With elections over, all the differences caused by clashing ambitions, oversized egos, ideological preferences, came to the fore and it was with some difficulty that V.P. Singh took oath as prime minister on 2 December 1989 accompanied only by Devi Lal as deputy prime minister. The lack of trust that was to become more open later was evident even at the swearing-in ceremony where Devi Lal made a joke of himself by insisting on inserting the term deputy prime minister into the oath despite the President's gentle admonition that he should only say 'minister', as if he was not sure that the prime minister would stick to his promise!

Though V.P. Singh started out with a high-profile visit to Punjab in which he visited the Golden Temple and drove around in an open jeep, as if to heighten the contrast with the heavily guarded Rajiv, and made many noises about reversing Congress policies, it was typical of his administration that the high-sounding words did not lead anywhere. Punjab was as bad as ever at the end of his term, and Kashmir was much worse. He made George Fernandes head of the Kashmir Affairs Committee, but allowed Arun Nehru and Mufti Mohammed Sayeed to continue to interfere, and then, without consulting anybody, appointed Jagmohan the governor of Kashmir! Sure enough, Farooq Abdullah, the chief minister of Kashmir, resigned in protest, since Jagmohan was the man who had cost him his chief ministership in 1983 by encouraging defections against him. True to form, Jagmohan dissolved the assembly, and, again without consulting anyone, V.P. Singh recalled him, and made him a Rajya Sabha member to mollify him. In fact, apart from completing the withdrawal of Indian troops from Sri Lanka, and settling the trade and transit dispute with Nepal, there was little that the National Front government had to show for itself. It was also unable to use its clout with the BJP and the Muslim leaders to bring them to a resolution of the Ayodhya dispute. On the contrary, Advani's rath yatra, or chariot-ride, inflamed communal passions to fever pitch, just as Mandal aroused caste feelings as never before.

Perhaps the main reason for the inability of the government to get its act together was the enormous amount of time and energy spent on trying to resolve internal differences. Chandra Shekhar made no secret of his antipathy to the prime minister. He lost no time in supporting Farooq Abdullah when he resigned. Ajit Singh was disliked by Devi Lal, and Devi Lal by almost everybody but Chandra Shekhar. Devi Lal disliked Ajit Singh, the son of Charan Singh, who first articulated peasant interests in North India in 1967, but he loved his own son, Om Prakash Chautala, so much that he made him chief minister of Haryana in his place once he became deputy prime minister. A scandal followed Chautala's attempt to seek election from Meham, as enquiries established that large-scale rigging and physical intimidation of voters had occurred, and the election was countermanded by the Election Commission. Chautala resigned as chief minister only to be reinstated two months later. This proved too much for at least Arif and Arun Nehru and they resigned from the government. As if on cue, V.P. Singh also resigned, but was persuaded to continue after assurances of Chautala stepping down. But that was not the last trick the 'Elder Uncle' or Tau', as Devi Lal was called, had up his sleeve. He now accused Arif and Arun Nehru of corruption, and produced a letter purportedly written by V.P. Singh to the President of India in 1987, accusing them of involvement in the Bofors deal. V.P. Singh, declaring that the letter was a badly disguised forgery, dismissed Devi Lal on 1 August 1990.

Never one to take things lying down, Devi Lal gave a call for a big peasants' rally in New Delhi on 9 August to show V.P. Singh his true strength. Though V.P. Singh denies this, it is widely believed that, rattled by this threat, and wanting to divert attention, he made the most controversial decision of his rule. On 7 August, he announced in parliament that the report of the Mandal Commission, appointed by the Janata government (1977–79) and quietly ignored by Mrs Gandhi, would be implemented. The recommendations were that 27 per cent of jobs in the government services and public undertakings be reserved for candidates belonging to the 'backward castes', thus bringing the total in the reserved category to 49.5 per cent, as 22.5 per cent was already reserved for the Scheduled Castes or dalits and the Scheduled Tribes.[3] The recommendations included, as a second stage, to be implemented later, reservations in educational institutions and promotions.

The announcement was greeted with widespread dismay and anger. Even those who did not disagree with the decision in principle were upset at the sudden and arbitrary manner in which it was taken. In what was becoming an increasingly familiar pattern, V.P. Singh did not consult even close associates before making the announcement. Biju Patnaik, R.K. Hegde, Yashwant Sinha and Arun Nehru were among those unhappy with the decision for one reason or another. The left parties and the BJP were upset that they had no clue about the decision. Devi Lal and Chandra Shekhar came out in strong condemnation. The criticisms ranged from the move's timing and lack of effort to build up a consensus, to the divisive nature of the move and the faulty criteria used for identifying backward castes. The CPM wanted economic criteria to be used as the basis of reservation, and many others, including Hegde, agreed with that view. Eminent sociologists pointed out that the method of identification of backward castes was outdated and changes in social structure since independence had not been taken into account. Among those who were called 'backward castes' in the report were the sections who were the major beneficiaries of land reforms and the Green Revolution and they could hardly claim special treatment on grounds of backwardness. There were, no doubt, some sections among those identified as backward castes who were in fact not very different from Scheduled Castes in their economic and social status, and deserved special treatment, but they needed to be identified carefully and separately, for, if they were lumped together with castes who were backward only in name, they were unlikely to be able to compete for benefits.[4]

The worst aspect of the Mandal decision was that it was socially divisive: it pitted caste against caste in the name of social justice; it made no effort to convince those who would stand to lose that they should accept it in the larger interest; it encouraged the potential beneficiaries to treat all those who opposed the decision as representing upper-caste interests, and reintroduced caste as a concept and identity even in those sectors of society from where it had virtually disappeared. Further, one would have expected that forty years after reservations were first introduced for Scheduled Castes in the constitution, a serious debate and empirical examination of their efficacy as a strategy for social justice would be in order before they were extended to new sections. The arguments that reservations were perpetuated not because they served the interests of the really disadvantaged but of the elites among the castes benefiting from reservation, that the focus on reservation as the preferred and often sole strategy for social justice prevented consideration of

other equally if not more effective strategies, that politics of caste identity benefited leaders rather than the victims of the caste system—all these needed to be seriously debated and the case for extension of reservation established and public opinion built around it before such major social engineering was attempted.[5]

The strong and violent reaction of the student community in North India illustrates this.[6] In a situation where large numbers of students look upon employment in the government sector as a major career option, and one that it is still possible to avail of without using influence or money as recruitment is done via competitive examinations, the sudden blocking of almost one half of the seats for reservation, seemed patently unfair. This was especially so as they recognized that many of those who would benefit were economically and socially their equals or even superiors. This was seen as very different from reservation for Scheduled Castes, as the social and economic disability was unambiguous, and a social consensus had been built on the issue since the days of the freedom struggle. Besides, students were not innocent of the political motives that underlay the decision, as these were being loudly debated by the leaders of the National Front itself.

Anti-Mandal protest took the form of attacks on public property, burning of buses, rallies, meetings, discussions in the Press. Students were in the forefront, and were often supported by other sections of society, such as teachers, office workers and housewives. Towns and cities in North India were the locale and police firing was resorted to in Delhi, Gorakhpur, Varanasi and Kanpur among other places. From mid-September, desperate that protests were proving futile, a few students attempted self-immolation. Passions ran high, with those for Mandal condemning this as barbaric and farcical and possibly stage-managed, and those against shocked at the trivialization and lack of understanding of the depth of sentiment on the issue. The prime minister's appeals to students to desist from violence and self-immolation went unheeded. While for a major part anti-Mandal protest remained free of caste overtones, and in fact its dominant discourse was against caste as an organizing principle, there did develop a very negative tendency, especially in the later stages, and partly in reaction to being characterized as upper caste motivated, for upper-caste students to coalesce into previously unthinkable 'forward caste' associations, and for caste-flavoured abuses to be traded in college hostel corridors and dining halls. What was once a major forum for dissolving of caste identities became for some time the cradle in which they were reborn. The protest ended when the Supreme Court granted a stay on the implementation of the Mandal Report on 1 October 1990.[7]

Meanwhile, the BJP had its own agenda to complete and Mandal probably gave it the push it needed. Seeing the strong popular reaction to Mandal, the BJP had started making noises about withdrawing support. On 25 September, L.K. Advani embarked on his 6,000-mile-long rath yatra from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya (to lay the foundation stone for the Ram mandir) which ended on 23 October at Samastipur in Bihar with his arrest and the withdrawal of support by the BJP. V.P. Singh could not satisfy the BJP without alienating his own party and his left allies and chose thus to break with the BJP. On 30 October, there was firing on the crowd trying to reach the spot in Ayodhya chosen for the shilanyas of the Ram temple. The rath yatra, Advani's arrest and

the firing at Ayodhya aroused communal passions and the ensuing riots led to many deaths in North India. On 5 November, the Janata Dal split and fifty-eight legislators elected Chandra Shekhar as their leader. On 7 November, the second attempt at running a non-Congress government came to an end after eleven stormy months.

Chandra Shekhar to Vajpayee: A Brief Survey

The major issues that emerged in this phase have been extensively discussed in the thematic chapters; hence what is offered here is merely a brief survey of basic political changes to maintain the continuity of the narrative.

The short-lived Chandra Shekhar government which took office on 10 November 1990 with the support of Congress had only one role to perform: to hold the baby till Congress decided it wanted to go for elections. A pretext was found and support withdrawn on 5 March 1991. The elections were announced from 19 May and one round of voting was over when tragedy again struck the ill-fated family of Indira Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi, who was rounding off one phase of campaigning with a late-night meeting in Sriperumbudur, 40 km from Madras, was blown to pieces when a young woman, who came forward to greet him, triggered a bomb that she had strapped to her waist. Widely believed, and later proven, to be the handiwork of LTTE militants, the killing of the 46-year-old Rajiv, who was regaining popularity with his sadbhavana yatras and other attempts to reach out to the people, generated a sympathy wave strong enough to give Congress 232 seats and the status of the single largest party. Narasimha Rao formed what was initially a minority Congress government on 21 June, but which gradually achieved a majority, and lasted a full five-year term. It undertook the most radical economic reforms, and in the first year brought down the caste and communal temperature to a great extent and was successful in restoring in normality to Punjab, and improving the situation in Kashmir and Assam. It failed to save the Babri Masjid from demolition or prevent the widespread rioting that followed. All this has been discussed thematically elsewhere in this volume. Suffice it to say that Narasimha Rao's regime, despite its many achievements which are likely to be placed in a more favourable light with a longer historical perspective, tended to lose steam in the last two years, with a slowing down of economic reforms, surfacing of corruption charges and the 'hawala' scandal which led to charges, later found to be almost entirely unsustainable, of bribes and foreign exchange violations against many Congress and Opposition leaders.

The elections held in 1996 led to Congress winning only 140 seats and the BJP increasing its tally to 161 from 120 in 1991. A short-lived BJP government lasted from 16 May to 1 June, but failed to get majority support. This was followed by a United Front government with H.D. Deve Gowda as prime minister supported by Congress and the CPM in which the CPI joined as a partner and India got her first Communist Home Minister in Indrajit Gupta. Congress withdrew support on 30 March 1997, failed to form a government, and again supported a United Front government, this time with I.K. Gujral as prime minister. The support was withdrawn again and fresh elections held in February 1998 which led to the formation of BJP-led government with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as prime minister. The BJP notwithstanding getting only 182 seats, managed to secure the support of secular parties like the TDP, AIADMK and Trinamul Congress. The

Congress got only 147 seats. The large number of allies prevented stability, with their competing demands, and ultimately Jayalalithaa withdrew her AIADMK from the alliance, leading to the government losing the vote of confidence in April 1999. Efforts to form an alternative Congress or secular coalition government failed and elections were announced once again. The BJP-led government continued as a caretaker government till the elections were held in September and October 1999. The election results improved the tally of the BJP and its allies to 296 from 253 though the BJP's own tally did not change, and the Congress with Sonia Gandhi at its helm was down to 134 with allies. The discrepancy in vote shares was much less, with Congress and its allies holding on to 34.7 per cent, an improvement of 3.4 per cent over 1998, as compared to the BJP and its allies' 41.3 per cent, which improved by only 1.2 per cent over 1998. A new government was formed with Vajpayee again at the helm. As always, history had its ironies, the millennium was ushered in by a government led by a party that for years had seemed to be more interested in reviving and avenging the past than in heralding the future! The coming millennium, however, with its new horizons, could yet give the indomitable Indian people the future they deserved.

The NDA Government

When the BJP came to power as the leading party in the NDA, friendly journalists and other sympathetic analysts were fond of saying that responsibility and power would smoothen the rough edges of the party, strengthen the moderates and tame the extreme elements. The BJP projected itself as a party with a difference: united, disciplined, honest and dedicated. Unfortunately, expectations were belied on both counts. The communal temperature was pushed up by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal and the RSS, who had no intention of being tamed, but, on the contrary, had every intention of using state power to fulfil their long-cherished desire of creating a Hindu Rashtra or nation. Despite the BJP's claim that it had put its communal agenda on the backburner in deference to the sensitivities of its coalition partners, the agitation for the building of the Ram mandir at Ayodhya reached its peak in early 2002, notwithstanding the Supreme Court's refusal to allow construction on the disputed site and the surrounding land. This agitation had a direct effect on the communal situation in Gujarat, which witnessed what many observers have called a genocide lasting for close to three months from February 2002. The ideological agenda of communalization of education was pursued with great vehemence by the RSS Minister for Human Resource Development, Murli Manohar Joshi. (We have dealt with the communal situation in a separate chapter.)

The second claim, of being a party with a difference, received severe knocks from an almost endless series of scams that seemed to be surfacing with monotonous regularity. The first big one was the exposé by Tehelka, a news-based Indian website, which laid bare the nexus between arms dealers, army men and politicians. It was a sting operation carried out by journalists posing as arms dealers, walking around defence establishments, and party offices, with suitcases which had cash as well as hidden cameras and tape-recorders. The video-tapes were aired on a television channel on 13 March 2001, and all hell broke loose. The tapes not only compromised senior army officials, but the president of the BJP, Bangaru Laxman, who was seen putting away

Rs 100,000 into his table drawer. The president of the Samata Party, Jaya Jaitly, was found accepting a sum of Rs 200,000 at the official residence of the Defence Minister, George Fernandes. Laxman and Fernandes both had to go. The government also had to appoint an enquiry committee. The government's reputation also suffered because it was widely believed that Tehelka was hounded thereafter, and its staff and promoters harassed in a variety of ways, including being arrested. Even when it was revealed later that Tehelka had used means, such as hiring the services of call girls, which most agreed were unethical, the government's attempt to use this to cast doubts on the veracity of the original exposé did not cut much ice.

The Unit Trust of India scam, in which millions of small investors lost their savings, also tarnished reputations as names of officials close to the prime minister and from his household were talked about. Similarly, in 2002, Ram Naik, the Petroleum Minister, came under a cloud because his ministry had allotted over 3,000 petrol pumps, gas agencies and kerosene dealerships to BJP and RSS leaders and their relatives. Parliament was stalled for days and allotments cancelled. This was followed by revelations that the largest number of allotments of prime land in the heart of Delhi since 1999 had been made to organizations affiliated to the RSS.

The 'mini-general elections' in May 2001 in which Kerala, Pondicherry, Assam, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal went to the polls had returned the Congress to power in the first three, the AIADMK, its ally, in Tamil Nadu, and the Left Front in West Bengal. With this, the number of Congress chief ministers went up to eleven. The BJP had failed to make any gains. In fact, the only election won by the BJP in this period was in Gujarat, and that in very exceptional circumstances, which hardly added to its credibility. In 2003, it lost Himachal Pradesh as well, which was considered a stronghold, to the Congress. Later, it won Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, and such was the optimism generated by this that the general elections, due only after October 2004, were advanced by about six months to April–May. The economy was thought to be in such good shape, with large foreign exchange reserves, and low inflation, that the Finance Minister went on a pre-election binge. The NDA launched what it thought was an unbeatable campaign: 'India Shining'. But large numbers of Indians thought otherwise, and the result was described as the biggest upset since 1977, when the Congress was swept out of power in the elections following the Emergency.

The UPA Government

The Congress was now the largest party with 146 MPs, and with the support of its allies and the Left Front, had no difficulty forming a government. Sonia Gandhi as party president was the obvious choice, and received support from all concerned, but despite enormous pressure from party cadres and colleagues, refused to accept the post of prime minister. Instead, she named Manmohan Singh, eminent economist and former Finance Minister, a man with a reputation of total probity, who had overseen the crucial economic reforms in 1991 when Narasimha Rao was prime minister. Sonia's sacrifice was widely appreciated, and served to enhance her stature among the people and increased her influence in the party.

The Hindu newspaper expressed the views of many when it described the election verdict as

'clearly a vote against the NDA's policies—its highly divisive policies pursued most viciously in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh and also in the educational arena'. It also explained why the India Shining campaign failed to take off: 'by seeming to mock the deprivations of the mass of voters in rural as well as urban areas, it opened up a huge credibility gap for the ruling party.' The new government sought to give expression to popular sentiment by emphasizing that it would follow a strategy of reforms with a human face, and that it believed in inclusive growth. A National Advisory Council, with Sonia at the head, was set up with representatives of civil society groups, intellectuals and experts as its members, to assist the government in policy formulation.

Beginning with education, the process of communalization was sought to be reversed. The task was not easy, for it is easier to destroy than to build. Heads of many institutions, who had been taking a blatantly partisan approach, were changed, governors of many states replaced, school textbooks, particularly history books, sent for review, and Prevention of Terrerism (POTA) repealed. However, not everybody was satisfied at the pace of what came to be called 'detoxification', and sections among the left and civil society groups were often quite critical of the government's approach. The UPA government also set up a new Ministry for Minority Affairs, as well as a committee headed by Justice Sachar to make recommendations for the welfare of economically and educationally backward sections among the minorities. It also introduced the Communal Violence (Prevention, Control and Rehabilitation of Victims) Bill in parliament.

There were major developments in the economic sphere and in foreign policy which are dealt with elsewhere in the book, but we need to mention here some important developments in the sphere of public policy. Largely at the initiative of the National Advisory Council, and with the strong support of Sonia Gandhi, a national Right to Information (RTI) Act was passed in October 2005. This legislation superseded the few state-level acts that were already in place, and bestowed on citizens the right to get information from any public authority within a period of thirty days. The legislation was regarded as among the most progressive in the world, and refusal to comply entailed penalties. The Centre as well as the states were obliged to set up Information Commissions which had powers to hear complaints and punish officials for non-compliance with the law. An interesting feature of the Indian law was that it came about as a result of a popular mass movement which began in Rajasthan under the leadership of the Magsaysay award winner Aruna Roy and the Mazdoor Kishan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), and grew into a National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), with Shekhar Singh as the Convenor, and was not simply a government initiative. The popular response to the Act has been tremendous, as it has been welcomed by a public sick of corruption, and official high-handedness. Officials, who earlier refused to heed any complaints, have been reported to have rushed to do the needful and at times even visit the homes of citizens who took recourse to the Act to seek information on missing rations, bad roads, forged muster rolls, delayed passports, and the like.

Another progressive measure that was taken, again at the prodding of the National Advisory Council and its Chairperson, as well as in response to a long-standing campaign on the issue, was the passing of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in September 2005, under which the government is obliged to provide hundred days of employment per annum to

one member of every poor rural family. Initially covering the two hundred most backward districts, it is to be extended to the entire country in five years' time. The scheme has enormous potential, for it can increase the bargaining position of the poor in rural society, and, especially if the Right to Information Act is used to keep a check on the possibilities of corruption, it can besides providing livelihoods, empower the poor to fight for their rights.

On the women's front, while the legislation for reservation of one-third seats in the legislatures for women continued its endless wait for political consensus, other useful measures were put on board. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, was passed, and it was a big leap forward for it recognized the existence of emotional, psychological and physical violence in the home. Another radical measure gave Hindu women inheritance rights in coparcenary property equal to men's in all the states. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill was also on the anvil. Women were guaranteed one-third of the jobs made available under the NREGA.

Another positive initiative which started well but lost steam was the Right to Education Bill. The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) took two years to deliberate and propose a bill, but when the time came in the summer of 2006 to get it passed, the Human Resource Development (HRD) Ministry sent it to the states as a model bill on the plea that the Finance Ministry had expressed its inability to find the necessary funds for its implementation. The state governments in their turn sent it back to the Centre on the ground that they had no funds either! This was typical of the way the issue of compulsory education has been treated by almost all governments since independence. It was never a top priority, even though it was evident that it was the single most important measure that empowered the poor. However, the movement for Right to Education continued to press for the enactment of the bill, and it was hoped that its efforts would meet with success.

Higher education, on the other hand, was promised liberal increases in funding to neutralize the opposition to the 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Castes (OBCs) which was legislated to be initiated from 2007, as institutions of higher learning were told to increase seats in all courses to ensure that general category seats were not reduced. The Supreme Court, however, stayed the implementation of the order, in response to petitions questioning the measure on various counts. This provided some respite to the institutions which were hard put to increase capacity, given the already dismal situation regarding availability of faculty and infrastructure. However, this initiative of the government also raised the larger issue of autonomy of educational institutions, autonomy from government and autonomy from populist political pressure, which were a prerequisite for pursuit of excellence. Was it possible for institutions, such as the IIMs and IITs, which achieved world recognition, to continue to deliver their best, if they did not even have the autonomy to decide on the numbers they were to admit?

Foreign Policy in the 1990s

New Challenges: Today and Tomorrow

Indian foreign policy faced a big challenge with the demise of the Soviet Union, the end of the

Cold War, and the shift to the economic strategy of liberalization and globalization. The two events coincided in the case of India in the year 1991, and the consequences of both were not dissimilar. India had to re-order her relationship with the US and the Western world. She needed the capital, the technology and the markets for export and there was, in any case, no Soviet Union to fall back upon. Her success also critically depended upon how quickly and well she could use the new strategy to achieve rapid economic development, because ultimately, in today's world, it is those with the largest economic clout who carry the greatest political weight in international affairs. In the words of V.P. Dutt:[8] 'If one were asked to identify just one most notable trend in the world, one would say that the economic struggle had taken primacy over the political struggle.'

While it was true that the good old days of Indo-Soviet friendship were over, there still existed a tremendous reservoir of goodwill and loyalties in the countries of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Russia may have been going through a period of crisis, but she was a great power with a strong sense of her own position and was bound to make a comeback. It was in India's interest to maintain good relations with Russia. Other countries of Central Asia that had broken out of the Soviet Union also had tremendous potential as friends and allies. They were rich in natural resources, were strategically placed and were already being courted by the US and other Western powers. Fortunately, they too had old links with India dating back to the Soviet era and the Indian government had been actively building upon them.

India's stock in the Middle East had been high since she had always supported the Arab struggle for Palestine and did not have any diplomatic relations with Israel. In recent years, while maintaining support for the PLO, India had also opened up ties with Israel. India had also succeeded in maintaining friendly ties with Iran and had refused to fall in line with US policies of total ostracism of Iraq and Iran. As a result, Pakistan's efforts to use the Organisation of Islamic Unity (or States) against India were not very successful. By refusing to join in the hysteria against Iraq let loose during the Gulf War by the US, India had also retained her goodwill, built over many years of economic partnership, with Iraq.

Indian diplomacy also had to tread some new paths. Much of the world today was getting organized into new trade or economic blocs, ASEAN, EEC, NAFTA, etc. India had shown insufficient interest and awareness of this trend. She made little effort to become part of ASEAN at the right time and had only lately become a dialogue partner. SAARC was yet to emerge as a serious economic bloc, though efforts in that direction were being made. The move to bring together countries of the Indian Ocean, in which India played an active part, was a welcome one, especially as it included South Africa, an old friend with great potential as an economic partner.

India needed to learn to look eastwards as well. To Japan, which was the largest donor in the world, with the biggest surpluses of investible capital and with whom India had no history of colonial domination or border wars or economic arm-twisting and whose long-term strategic interests to keep China in check dovetailed with India's. India needed to develop closer economic and political ties with other countries of Southeast Asia with whom she had historically good relations—with Indonesia whom India supported in Indonesia's struggle against Dutch colonialism, with Vietnam, whom India supported in her struggle against French and American

colonialism, with Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia with whom India had old cultural ties, with Singapore which was the powerhouse of Southeast Asia and had shown how modern technology enabled a tiny city state to become an economic superpower.

This was also necessary if India was to contribute to the making of a multipolar world and the democratization of international relations, all of which was in her enlightened self-interest. The sure way of preventing the crystallization of a unipolar world was by gently encouraging countries which had achieved economic strength to assert themselves in international affairs. Japan and at least some of the East Asian tigers which had too long been in the habit of silently endorsing US hegemony could well begin to want to express their own view of the world. All breaches in unipolarity and in favour of plurality were in India's and the world's interest and were to be encouraged, as was done so successfully via the NAM in the 1950s Cold War. In this respect the strong support received for continuation of NAM at its tenth annual summit in 1992 in Jakarta from member states, despite the many problems it had been facing, was very encouraging. Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia, who had emerged as a strong independent voice in world affairs, expressed himself very firmly in favour of NAM, as did Suharto of Indonesia who was in the chair. The summit demanded democratization of the UN, more open multilateral trading systems, greater financial flows to developing countries, and other such measures.

On the flip side was the increasing tendency of the US to interfere in the name of self-determination and human rights, with Kosovo being an example. Countries like India and China and even Russia with large ethnically diverse populations were vulnerable to attention of this nature. No wonder that they protested against the US and NATO role in Kosovo. The technologization of war the made such interference possible as it reduced the human costs to the aggressors to negligible proportions. Both the Gulf War and Kosovo demonstrated this to the hilt.

India had to adapt her foreign policy to this new situation. Keeping intact its goal of retaining independence of action in international affairs, and seeking to find a respectable place for herself in the community of nations, India had to constantly evaluate the changing nature of in ternational alignments and find the means to secure her objectives. The world order was in flux, and likely to remain so for some time, and in this fluid situation India needed to evolve a creative foreign policy.

We take a closer look at two of the most important events in recent years that had international implications: India's nuclear tests in 1998 and the near-war with Pakistan in 1999.

Pokhran II

India's conduct of another round of nuclear tests on 11 May 1998 and declaring herself a nuclear weapons state is a complex question that has to be examined in the context of the changing world environment and the position adopted by India since independence on the nuclear issue.

From the days of Nehru, India had maintained a principled and sustained position, arguing for nuclear disarmament and a nuclear weapons-free world. This position was forcefully and actively pursued by Rajiv Gandhi when he tried to initiate global action towards phased nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, once again pioneered by Nehru, India laid great emphasis on development of science and technology, particularly on keeping abreast with developments in the

field of nuclear science. Subsequent governments kept abreast with developments. The first nuclear tests were conducted successfully in October 1974 when Indira Gandhi was the prime minister. The governments of Rajiv Gandhi, Narasimha Rao, Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral were in full readiness for exercising the nuclear option and in fact it is said that Narasimha Rao in 1995 was about to give the go-ahead for tests similar to the 1998 ones but the Americans got to know of it and put enough pressure for Rao to stay his hand. Thus, India till the May 1998 tests, while maintaining her position in favour of nuclear disarmament, had kept herself ready for exercising the nuclear option. This dual position was maintained for several reasons.

First, there existed after the Second World War an extremely iniquitous world order on the nuclear front. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was essentially conceived to ensure that four countries, the US, Soviet Union, Britain and France, remained the only nuclear weapons-owning countries in the world. China forced its way into this elite club and joined the other four in the clamour to restrict the nuclear monopoly now to the 'Big Five'. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which the nuclear powers had been pressurizing non-nuclear countries to sign was equally discriminatory as its aim was again to keep other countries from going nuclear while refusing *any* commitment on the part of the nuclear powers towards nuclear disarmament, not even within a fifty-year time-frame. India's efforts to get such a commitment included in the CTBT were brushed aside, forcing her to refuse to sign the CTBT as she did the NPT. The message was clear. Non-nuclear countries have no voice.

Second, India was surrounded by nuclear weapons. On one side there was China (a country which invaded India in 1962) with a major nuclear armoury of 400 to five 500 nuclear warheads and a sophisticated long-distance delivery system, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and nuclear bases in Tibet. On the other, US nuclear ships cruised the seas around India with a base in Diego Garcia. Also, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Russia had major nuclear weapons. Moreover, with open Chinese collusion and help, Pakistan (a country that forced India into war three times and maintained a consistent low-intensity hostility almost continuously) had developed not only considerable nuclear capability but also a substantial long-distance missile programme. A surface-to-surface ballistic missile with a range of 1,500 km named rather provocatively, Ghauri (presumably after the notorious invader into India centuries ago), had been successfully launched before the Indian nuclear tests of May 1998. Soon after the Indian tests, Pakistan conducted its tests and announced the explosion of its bomb which is widely suspected to have been 'mothered' by China. The growing China–Pakistan nuclear axis, given their collusion diplomatically and in war against India, was a matter of serious concern.

The iniquitous world nuclear order and the security concern posed by some of its immediate neighbours go a long way in explaining why all regimes in India saw the necessity of it maintaining nuclear preparedness, and why there had been for quite some time considerable support within the country for going ahead and exercising the nuclear option.

It was in this situation that the BJP-led government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee gave the go-ahead (rather hurriedly, within a few weeks of assuming power) for the nuclear tests that were conducted in May 1998. On 11 May three underground tests, one of them thermonuclear (showing, it was claimed, a hydrogen bomb capability with a 45 kiloton yield), were conducted in

Pokhran, the same site used in 1974. Two days later another two tests were conducted at the same site. These were tests with a lower yield aimed at generating data for computer simulation and the capacity to carry out sub critical experiments in the future if necessary. There was no talk this time of tests for 'peaceful purposes' as Indira Gandhi had maintained earlier. Vajpayee declared, following the tests, that India was now a nuclear weapons state. The indigenously developed Prithvi and Agni surface-to-surface missiles could now carry nuclear warheads.

The country, by and large, with the exception of sections of the left and some small anti-nuclear groups, welcomed the tests and particularly the achievements of the scientific team led by A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and R. Chidambaram, the Chief Scientific Adviser and the head of the Department of Atomic Energy. The Opposition leader, Congress president Sonia Gandhi, praised the achievement of the scientists and engineers, expressed pride in Congress having kept India's nuclear capability up to date and reiterated the commitment of Congress to a nuclear weapons-free world and peace with her neighbours.

However, the manner in which the BJP government exercised the nuclear option and particularly its handling of the situation after the tests was widely disapproved of. It was suspected that the government hurriedly went in for the tests without adequate preparation with an eye on the political advantage it could reap at home. The suspicion appeared to be justified when the BJP resorted to open jingoism, talking of building a temple at Pokhran and making threatening noises regarding neighbouring countries. In fact, one of the most important national dailies in India had to editorially express 'the strongest possible condemnation' of an article which appeared in *Panchjanya,* the mouthpiece of the RSS, where 'an implicit case for an Indian nuclear attack on Pakistan' was made.[9] Having done the tests what India needed was to reassure the world and particularly its neighbours of her peaceful intent through skilful diplomatic moves, but the government did just the opposite. Also, seen as political disasters were the Defence Minister, George Fernandes's pronouncement, a week before the tests, naming China as 'potential threat number one' and prime minister Vajpayee's letter to President Clinton, which was published in *The New York Times,* defending the blasts by naming China and Pakistan as security threats. By unnecessarily naming specific countries and suggesting that the nuclear capability was being built against them, the wrong message was sent out. China (with whom India's relations were being improved with sustained hard work by previous Congress and United Front governments) had initially reacted moderately to the tests but now it adopted an almost vicious tone.

The response from the West and Japan was, as expected, negative and the tests were widely condemned. The US went further and immediately announced the imposition of sanctions. Japan, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Canada suspended aid to India. The US, however, did not succeed in getting the G-8 countries to take collective action against India. France, Russia and Germany continued their normal economic links with India. Britain as the current President of the European Union (EU) failed to get the EU to adopt a strong, anti-India stance.

While the long-term fallout of the sanctions and how long they would last was not clear immediately, what was certain was that India's nuclear tests posed a major challenge to the iniquitous nuclear world order in which the nuclear haves blatantly resorted to double standards.

Witness the fuss made by the US about the Indian tests and its insistence that India sign the CTBT when not enough support could be generated within the US to ratify the CTBT. As the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, put it, 'You cannot have an exclusive club (whose members) have the nuclear weapons and are refusing to disband it and tell them (India and Pakistan) not to have them.'[10]

Kargil

After Pokhran, Pakistan carried out its own nuclear tests and there was much sabre-rattling on both sides. In early 1999, when the atmosphere appeared more congenial, Vajpayee initiated the 'bus diplomacy' (travelling on the first bus service between India and Pakistan), aimed at making a major breakthrough in improving relations with Pakistan. However, as later events revealed, from long before the much-hyped bus ride to Lahore, soldiers of the Pakistan Army and Pakistan-backed Mujahideen (religious militants and mercenaries), were busy infiltrating into Indian territory. In fact, by May when the whole crisis blew up it was discovered that Pakistani armed forces had intruded deep across the LoC in Kashmir and had occupied key strategic peaks in the Kargil area. India had to mount a massive and extremely difficult counter-offensive from a disadvantageous military position, which was extremely costly particularly in terms of human lives, in order to evict the intruders. Pictures of body bags of hundreds of Indian soldiers and officers killed in the Kargil operations began to appear regularly in Indian newspapers in a manner not witnessed before.

The international reaction to the Kargil crisis was, somewhat unexpectedly, almost unanimous in favour of India. Even the US, Britain and China—long-time allies of Pakistan—put pressure on Pakistan to withdraw from Indian territory. Pakistan's claim that it had no regular army men on the Indian side of the border but only provided moral support to militants was not taken seriously by anybody. The US stance can be partly explained by the growing fear of international Islamic terrorism. Troops from the personal bodyguard of the Saudi Islamic fundamentalist Osama bin Laden, who was suspected to be behind the bomb attacks on US consulates in Africa in 1998 costing several 'American lives', were reported to be involved in the Pakistan operations in Kargil. China's being soft on India could be related to China finding India as the sole ally (apart from Russia) in questioning growing American hegemonism, witnessed starkly in the Kosovo crisis in early April– May 1999 where, disregarding the UN, the US had taken upon itself the role of playing the world's policeman.

The domestic fallout was complex. At one level, it proved extremely useful for the BJP in the elections that followed a few months after the end of the Kargil crisis. However, the crisis raised some fundamental questions for the Indian state. Once it became known that infiltration by Pakistani armed personnel was occurring from as early as the autumn of 1998, the question arose why nothing was done about it for so many months. Could it have been such a total intelligence failure in one of the most sensitive areas on India's border or was it more than that? A very senior officer of the Indian army, Brigadier Surinder Singh, commander of the Kargil-based 121 Brigade, alleged, including in court, with documentary evidence (part of which was published by the major Indian magazine *Outlook*), that intelligence about intrusion and setting up bases inside Indian territory was available for many months and repeated warnings were given (from as

early as August 1998) and these warnings were reached not only to the highest levels within the army but even to the government. This has raised doubts whether the BJP government deliberately allowed the situation to fester so that it could at an electorally opportune time come down with a heavy hand and project a 'victory' against the enemy— that is, use the Indian soldiers' lives as cannon fodder to gain political advantage. If this were to be proved true, it would certainly mark the lowest depths Indian politics ever reached. In any case, the government was compelled to institute a high-level enquiry committee to look into the matter.

The other disturbing aspect was that the BJP's actions upset the long-cherished traditions of keeping the armed forces in India out of politics. Chiefs of the military services were asked by the government to come to meetings of BJP party members. Large cutouts of senior officers of the armed forces decorated podiums where BJP leaders were to address meetings. Elements from within the BJP combine such as the VHP landed up in the defence headquarters in South Block with thousands of rakhis for soldiers, and priests were sent to Kargil to bless the soldiers—moves which could not be seen to be innocent in the context of the multi-religious nature of the Indian armed forces. The Muslim, Sikh and Christian soldiers who gave their lives in Kargil to defend India were excluded. All this, on top of the well-known efforts of the party to woo retired services personnel into active party politics and to even try and influence serving personnel with communal ideology, caused considerable alarm. Such acts have been sharply criticized in India, as any move which could politicize the armed forces and threaten the secular and democratic traditions nurtured over the past fifty years (particularly within the armed forces) would not be acceptable.

The fallout of the Kargil episode in Pakistan was that Nawaz Sharif, the elected prime minister, was deposed on 13 December 1999, in a *coup d'etat* by General Musharraf, whom Sharif had appointed Chief of the Army Staff. The US President intervened to save Sharif's life, and he was exiled to Saudi Arabia. Musharraf first became Chief Executive and later President. Though Musharraf claimed later that Sharif was in the know about the Kargil plan, it is clear from a telephonic conversation between him and his deputy General Aziz, which was intercepted by Indian Intelligence, that in fact Sharif had been kept in the dark.[11]

The Kandahar Incident

Indo-Pak relations took another nose-dive with the Kandahar incident. An Indian Airlines plane on its way from Kathmandu to Delhi on Christmas Eve of 1999 was hijacked by terrorists who demanded the release of thirty-six captured militants and a ransom. Strangely, the plane was allowed to take off from Amritsar in Indian Punjab where it had landed and stayed for a full forty minutes. It finally landed in Kandahar in Afghanistan, and one passenger was killed by the hijackers to make their intent clear. Negotiations were conducted with the help of the Taliban and finally, to the shock and disbelief of the entire nation, the Minister for External Affairs Jaswant Singh, personally escorted Maulana Masood Azhar, a major leader of the terrorists, and two others, in a special plane to Kandahar. The hijackers as well as the released terrorists were all Pakistan based, and this did not help improve matters between the two countries.

The Agra Summit

Meanwhile, the situation in Kashmir was continuing to be a cause of anxiety, despite attempts at talks with political elements. At this stage, Musharraf showed an inclination for engaging in dialogue, and Vajpayee invited him to Agra for a summit in July 2001. However, not enough groundwork had been done in advance, and while Vajpayee wanted wide-ranging talks, Musharraf wanted to talk only about Kashmir. Ultimately, there could be no agreement on the joint statement, because Pakistan wanted to include a reference to Kashmir as a core issue, and India wanted to include cross-border terrorism. Pakistani reports claimed that a joint draft in which Kashmir was mentioned without the word 'core', and terrorism put in without the adjective 'cross-border', was okayed by Vajpayee and Jaswant Singh, the Foreign Minister, but vetoed by the Home Minister, L.K. Advani, possibly in deference to the RSS.

The summit, held in full media glare, with TV channels covering it round the clock, was used to great effect by Musharraf and his aides to put forward their point of view before the Indian public. Musharraf held a much-watched breakfast meeting with senior Indian editors in which he termed the terrorism in Kashmir as an indigenous freedom struggle. The Indian establishment, on the other hand, did not share any information with their own media, and failed to project their point of view. As a public relations exercise, the Agra Summit was a great success for Musharraf and a disaster for India.

Relations with Pakistan did not improve substantially after that. At times, they deteriorated, as after the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December 2001, when India amassed huge numbers of troops on the border for no evident reason. The terrorist attack in the US on 11 September, 2001, after which Pakistan was chosen as the frontline state in the war against terrorism, exerted some pressure on Musharraf to condemn terrorism, but Pakistan remained unwilling and/or unable to call off the militants. India's credibility vis-à-vis Kashmir improved greatly after the successful holding of elections in Jammu and Kashmir in September 2002, despite stepped-up militant violence. Conducted by the Election Commission under the leadership of James Lyngdoh, and the watchful eye of the diplomatic community and the international media, they were universally accepted as being free and fair. The contrast with the elections to the National and Provisional Assemblies of Pakistan a month later, which seemed to have convinced neither foreign nor indigenous observers about their fairness, was glaring indeed. The SAARC summit at Islamabad in January 2004 provided an opportunity for Vajpayee and Musharraf to meet on the sidelines, and the freeze that had set in since the attack on the Indian parliament thawed somewhat. Nor was any real breakthrough achieved by the Manmohan Singh government, despite meetings with Musharraf, and various confidence-building measures such as the starting of a bus service from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad. Terrorist attacks in Delhi, Varanasi, Bangalore and Mumbai, as well as Kashmir, killing hundreds, continued to sour relations. A positive feature was the emergence of public opinion on both sides of the border which favoured friendship and removing of restrictions on travel and communication.

Indo–US Relations and the Nuclear Agreement

The sanctions that were imposed on India by the US after the Pokhran nuclear tests were removed in October 2001 in the wake of the new situation created by 9/11. Even before that, Clinton visited India in March 2000, responding to a growing feeling in the US that it must engage with India as it was an important emerging economic power and a democracy. Also, the Indian community in the US had become a factor to be reckoned with, as it consisted mostly of highly educated professionals working in crucial sectors of US society. The new regime in the US under George Bush was fairly well-inclined towards India, whatever its other predilections. Even when it propped up Pakistan as a frontline state in the campaign against the Al-Qaida in Afghanistan by giving it a huge economic package and military supplies, it kept its relationship with India on course.

On the Indian side, there seemed to be an overanxiety to please the US, with Jaswant Singh making all kinds of offers in his Track2 diplomacy with Strobe Talbot. If Talbot's account is accurate, Jaswant Singh made incredulous offers such as that India could sign the CTBT if sanctions were withdrawn, and that the LoC in Kashmir could be accepted as the international border. When 9/11 happened, again Jaswant Singh shot off his mouth by offering India as a base for operations, forgetting that geography was a hindrance, as India had no border with Afghanistan. When its focus shifted to Iraq after the invasion in March 2003, the government wanted to send troops in response to a request by the US, but public opinion was strongly opposed, and the government wisely desisted. It was also generally believed that the US had been allowed to assume an informal intermediary role on the Kashmir issue, something which India had consistently refused to any outsider, on the ground that this was a bilateral matter.

Building on the lifting of sanctions, a dialogue had also begun in 2002 on civilian nuclear technology, nuclear safety, and high-tech trade. In January 2004, Bush and Vajpayee even issued a joint statement pledging cooperation in these areas. These discussions were taken to a new stage altogether during the tenure of the Manmohan Singh government which took office in May 2004. The turning point was a visit by Condoleezza Rice, US Secretary of State, in March 2005, during which she is reported to have told the prime minister that it was 'the policy of the United States to help India become a major world power in the 21st century'. Manmohan Singh's visit to the US resulted in a joint statement on 18 July 2005 which spelt out that the US would work to adjust US laws and international regimes to enable full civilian nuclear energy cooperation and trade with India, including provision of fuel supplies for the Tarapur nuclear reactors. On its part, India agreed to identify and separate civilian and military nuclear facilities and programmes in a phased manner, place its civilian nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, continue its unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, ensure non-proliferation, etc.

The agreement aroused a great deal of debate and discussion in India. The critics became more strident when India voted at the IAEA general body meeting in favour of a resolution warning Iran that it would get reported to the UN and face possible sanctions if it did not cooperate fully with IAEA investigations into its alleged efforts at enrichment of uranium towards development of a nuclear device. The Indian vote was under US pressure, it was said, and against Indian interest. The government stand was that Iran, being a signatory to the NPT, had been in a

position different from that of India when it undertook its nuclear tests. They also argued that the vote was cast only after an assurance that reporting to the UN would be postponed.

Others have pointed out that Iran was part of the nexus of beneficiaries of the Pakistan nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan's illegal nuclear trade. Further, Iran had voted innumerable times against India on the Kashmir issue in the Organization of Islamic Countries. In 1996, in a move rare in diplomatic history, it had even cancelled the then Foreign Minister, I.K. Gujral's visit to Iran, on the ground that India was oppressing Muslims in Kashmir. Besides, the real difficulty was that Iran could not make up its mind what it wanted to do, including whether it wanted to accept the various proposals made by Russia, China and EU countries. On the other hand, it was true that the US was unreasonably hostile to Iran, and this pushed Iran more and more into extremist positions.

To return to the discussion on the Indo-US nuclear agreement and the legislation passed by the US Congress with reference to this agreement, there were many concerns expressed by commentators, including by scientists associated with the nuclear programme. One major concern was about what would happen if India at any time in the future wanted to suspend its voluntary moratorium and undertake a nuclear test. The US would be obliged according to its laws to stop supply of fuel and technology, and ask for return of all material supplied to India's civilian nuclear programme. The second concern was with regard to what was to happen to spent fuel, as the Act did not specify this. The issue of whether or not the civilian and military programmes could be separated was also raised. The larger issue at stake was whether India's foreign policy would become subservient to US needs.

The government countered by saying that India would be bound only by those items that it signed in an agreement, and not by US law. India needed the uranium, it needed to step up its civilian nuclear programme for its burgeoning energy needs. The agreement meant that India was accepted as a de facto nuclear weapons state, and that was a huge gain. The prime minister assured the nation that Indian foreign policy was its own, and cited his public and private statements in the US that India was opposed to the Iraq war. He has also maintained that India will not accept any additional conditionalities. The deal was still being negotiated and it was not certain whether the final agreement will go through.

At the end of July 2007, the draft agreement was finally concluded. A joint statement issued by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice simultaneously in Washington and New Delhi on 27 July 2007 said: 'The United States and India have reached a historic milestone in their strategic partnership by completing negotiations on the bilateral agreement for peaceful nuclear cooperation.'

The National Security Adviser Narayanan, Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Chairman Anil Kakodkar and Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon jointly addressed a press conference to allay any public apprehensions about the deal. AEC Chairman Anil Kakodkar, some of whose earlier statements showed concerns over certain aspects of the agreement, said that he was 'satisfied' with the final document: 'What I said earlier was the national position. What I am saying now is the national position and what we have got is consistent with our national position. I have no reason to unhappy.'[12]

In Washington, during a briefing, US Under Secretary of State for South Asia Nicholas Burns said the 123 Agreement was 'the single most important initiative between the United States and India' He went on to say that the agreement was so significant and complex that 'the US will never offer (it to) any other country in the world'.[13]

The broad details of the agreement revealed certain unique provisions which the US has not conceded to any other country with which it has signed 123 agreements so far. These can be categorized as

(i). Enrichment and reprocessing: India has 'advance right to reprocess' US-origin safeguarded spent fuel.

(ii). Fuel supplies guarantee and strategic fuel reserve: The US has made commitment for uninterrupted fuel supplies to Indian reactors. It would also support India to build a strategic fuel reserve with the help of other supplier countries.

(iii). Non-hindrance clause: The US will not hinder the growth of India's nuclear weapons programme. The agreement also does not prescribe that India should not test a nuclear device, which most other 123 agreements have.

The agreement received widespread support in the media and other sections of civil society. However, the left parties, who support the UPA government from outside, raised their voice of protest over the deal citing certain provisions in the text which, they thought, would make India's foreign policy subservient to that of the US. The negotiations between the government and the left parties had yet to yield any fruitful result when this book went to press. The government was not left with much of a choice. It can press for the completion of the deal only at the risk of its own survival. A debate on the issue slated for the winter session of parliament is likely to clarify the issue further.