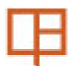

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INDIA IN 1983

New Challenges, Lost Opportunities

Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.

India in 1983 faced enormous pressure in the turmoil and violence in Assam and the Punjab, deepening ethnic and communal enmities. Politically, with serious electoral losses in Andhra and Karnataka, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi went on the defensive, and the Congress (I) demonstrated the resilience that belies the pronouncement of the party's collapse. The opposition parties, still in internecine struggle, continued their unity efforts with the formation of two competing alliances. The economy, with good monsoons to invigorate it, carried the prospect of record food-grain production and expanded, if still sluggish, industrial output. Internationally, Indira Gandhi was in high profile as chair of the Non-Aligned Movement and host to the Commonwealth Conference. Within the region, however, new tensions emerged in the relations between India and Sri Lanka, and prospects for Indo-Pakistani detente dimmed in an exchange of mutual accusations.

Social Unrest

Arising out of India's diversity, the "fissiparous tendencies" of regionalism, ethnicity, and communalism have long been sources of social unrest. In 1983 they converged in eruptions of violence that left 4,000 dead in Assam and a caldron of discontent in the Punjab.

The problem in Assam is rooted in the old conflict between Assamese and Bengalis, but over the past decade, the Assamese have seen their culture and political power threatened by the increasing number of Bengali immigrants. Competition for jobs has fueled ethnic resentment, and economic concerns have been compounded by Assamese grievances that the Center has neglected the state and exploited its resources. The volatility of the situation is further complicated by tribal resistance to encroachment upon their lands by Bengalis and Assamese alike. In 1979

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the discovery that large numbers of illegal aliens from Bangladesh were on the voter rolls in Assam provided the impetus for student-led agitations to expel the "foreigners"—a movement that soon won the support of virtually the whole of the Assamese-speaking population. While the conflict remained essentially ethnic, tensions took on an increasingly communal character as both Hindu and Muslim organizations exploited mutual anxieties.

The catalyst to crisis was the government's decision to hold constitutionally mandated elections in February 1983 for the Assam state assembly and the 12 vacant parliamentary seats. The alternative was a constitutional amendment to postpone elections until such time that the disputed voter rolls could be revised and polling conducted peaceably. The Assamese students, joined by the non-Communist opposition parties, called for a boycott of the elections. As tension mounted the government sent in a contingent of polling officers from other states, together with police and paramilitary reinforcements. But as the police sought to maintain order in the cities, rural Assam erupted in violence—the most serious in India since partition in 1947. Assamese, Bengalis, and tribals attacked each other, and at the village of Nellie, the scene of the worst violence, Lalung tribals massacred at least a thousand Bengali Muslims—mainly women and children.

Polling had to be postponed in 16 of the 126 constituencies; in another, a candidate was murdered and the election results countermanded. Elections could not be conducted for 7 of the 12 parliamentary seats. With the boycott by the Assamese, the state-wide voter turnout was less than 33%—half that of the elections of 1978. In one predominantly Assamese district, the turnout was less than 4%. The Congress (I) won 91 seats, an overwhelming majority in the 126-seat assembly, but it was an empty victory. Viewed as illegitimate by the Assamese, the government was discredited even before taking office.

In the months since the February elections, Assam has been relatively quiet—rather like an undetonated bomb that could go off at any moment. The issues remain unresolved, and the government's commitment to construct a half-billion dollar fence along the Bangladesh border has been greeted with derision in Assam and protest by Dhaka.

As Assam receded from the headlines, events in the Punjab took a darker turn. Following its fall from power in 1980, the Akali Dal—the Sikh political party—submitted a memorandum of demands and grievances to the Prime Minister; tensions in the Punjab have grown as murders, bombings, and intermittent agitation have increased. The Akali demands center on the questions of Chandigarh as capital of the Punjab and the sharing of river water for irrigation among the Punjab and

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adjoining states. Various religious demands, such as recognition of Amritsar as a "holy city," relate to Akali concerns for Sikh identity. The demands of the 1973 Anandpur Resolution for greater autonomy for the Punjab are more a talking point in Center-state relations than a serious aspiration for the moderate Sikh leaders who still retain control of the movement, but they are increasingly pressed by extremists led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a zealot who has stirred Sikh revivalism and fueled Hindu anxieties. There is little support among Sikhs for an independent "Khalistan" (Sikh state) at this time, but the appeal of separatism could grow as extremists among both Hindus and Sikhs divide the communities in distrust and fear.

In early 1983 various mediators tried their hand at bringing a settlement to the crisis that was pulling India's most prosperous state to the brink of chaos. The Center took the initiative in drawing the Akalis into renewed discussions, and Prime Minister Gandhi accepted the major religious demands of the Akalis. The Center indicated its willingness to place the territorial and water issues before special tribunals for adjudication, but not until the agitation itself was called off. In March the government announced the appointment of retired Supreme Court Justice R. S. Sarkaria (a Sikh) to head a commission to review Center-state relations more broadly. The Akalis, committed to greater state powers, welcomed the decision, but continued to press their demands through agitation. In April the Akalis' *rasta roko* campaign, blocking the roads in protest demonstrations, left 21 dead.

In the following months, Hindu-Sikh antipathies deepened as Hindu chauvinists—the R.S.S., numerous Hindu "defense" organizations, and even some "secular" political parties—responded to the increasing stridency of the Sikh extremists led by Bhindranwale. In the first week of October, armed Sikh militants stopped a bus and shot its six Hindu male passengers. The same day, another band of Sikh terrorists killed two officials on a train. None too soon, the central government, invoking emergency powers under the Constitution, dismissed Punjab's Congress (I) ministry and imposed President's Rule. Police and paramilitary forces, with sweeping powers, sought to restore order as the new governor and his advisers settled in for what is likely to be a long and difficult period of reconciliation. An early settlement of the outstanding issues—and perhaps even shared power in a Congress-Akali coalition government—is imperative if Sikh moderates are to isolate the extremists. But the political costs for the Congress in neighboring Haryana and Rajasthan suggest that a resolution of the crisis may lie on the other side of the next parliamentary elections that will probably be held in 1984.

Religious revivalism in the Punjab is mirrored in heightened com-

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munal consciousness throughout India. Hindu-Muslim tensions, the legacy of history, are nurtured by jealousy, suspicion, and competition for scarce resources. In 1983 incidents of communal violence took a heavy toll, the most serious in Hyderabad in September. In recent years, as communal groups—notably the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeem among the Muslims, and the Arya Samaj and R.S.S. among Hindus—have stirred the spirit of revival, religious festivals in Hyderabad have grown in size and devotional fervor. In 1983 the Muslim *pankah* and Hindu Ganesh processions—the largest ever and only one week apart—were shows of strength by each community and a provocation to violence that left 43 dead in 18 days of rioting.

The volatility of religious sentiment—and its potential impact on electoral politics—was witnessed in November in the uproar over reports that vanaspati, the vegetable oil that is the staple of Indian cooking, was being adulterated by cheap imported beef tallow. Hindu revivalists, leading mass demonstrations, denounced the pollution, invoking the memory of the allegations of greased cartridges that spurred the mutiny of 1857. The opposition parties attacked Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for her failure to safeguard the purity of the nation; Congress leaders, in turn, accused the former Janata government of having approved the beef tallow imports in the first place. In an atmosphere of growing militancy and confrontation, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (an R.S.S.-connected revivalist organization) launched a series of marches—*ekatmata yagya yatras,* or soul union pilgrimages—across the length and breadth of India. Prime Minister Gandhi warned of the "rabid communal forces" behind the marches and of the threat they posed in dividing the nation along religious lines. If she had been contemplating a call for early parliamentary elections, as many believed, it now seemed an unlikely prospect.

Party Politics and Elections

The year opened in the midst of the election campaigns for the Andhra and Karnataka assemblies. The two states had been under solid Congress rule since independence, surviving even the Janata wave in 1978. Politicians and the press viewed the elections as a referendum on the Congress (I)—not just on the discredited state governments, but on Prime Minister Gandhi's leadership. In what looked like a rehearsal for national parliamentary elections (which must be held no later than January 1985), Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv, who played a key role in candidate selection, actively campaigned throughout Andhra and Karnataka, as did virtually all the major national opposition party leaders.

In Andhra, Telegu film star T. N. Rama Rao, adored by his public as an avatar of the gods he portrayed on the screen, commanded center stage.

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Rama Rao (popularly known as TNR) offered school-lunch populism and a call for the devolution of power to the states. Appealing to regional sentiment, he attacked the succession of centrally imposed Congress chief ministers—four in two years—as an affront to Telegu pride. The opposition in Andhra remained divided: TNR's Telegu Desam; a united front of Janata, Lok Dal, the two communist parties (the CPI and CPM), and the Republican Party; and, going it alone, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But the Andhra Congress itself was in disarray and party organization at the grass roots nonexistent. In the January elections, the Congress defeat was massive. With only 30% of the vote (down from 39% in 1978), it won 60 seats in the 294-seat assembly. Other opposition parties fell before TNR's juggernaut: the Telegu Desam, with 46% of the vote, won 202 (69%) of the assembly seats.

The issue in Karnataka was the conduct and style of the state Congress government under Chief Minister Gundu Rao. Here the opposition parties united in a Janata-led front. The Janata (with the regional Kranti Ranga party) took 95 seats in the 224-seat assembly. The Congress, with 36% of the vote (down from 42% in 1978), won 81 seats. With independent and BJP support, the Janata had the necessary majority to form a government, with Ramakrishna Hedge as chief minister.

The Congress also lost in Tripura to the Communist Party–Marxist, a defeat for which it was prepared, but the Andhra and Karnataka losses came as a shock. The Congress defeats reduced the party to power in only 14 of India's 22 states. And while analysts were too soon to read a national pattern into the results, loss of support among Harijans and Muslims in both states portended serious erosion of the Congress party's traditional electoral base. The results, moreover, underscored the institutional weakness of the Congress organization and the costs of Indira Gandhi's imperious style. Throughout India dissidents within the party challenged Congress chief ministers with accusations of corruption and incompetence, and in Gujarat the Saurashtra-based faction broke away to form a separate Rashtriya Congress party.

In late January, in the wake of the Andhra-Karnataka debacle, Gandhi named Kamalapati Tripathi, 77-year-old former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, as "working president" of Congress to "look after the affairs of the party." The position came to naught, and Tripathi was soon bypassed by the new party troubleshooter, Rajiv Gandhi, appointed in February as General Secretary of the All-India Congress Committee. Efforts to revitalize the party began, but the long-promised organizational elections (last conducted in 1972) were never held. In February Prime Minister Gandhi dumped Maharashtra Chief Minister Babaseheb Bhosale, universally described as a sycophant, and allowed the state Congress legisla-

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tive party to choose as chief minister Vasantrao Dada Patil, a man with power in his own right. But Gandhi remained determined to hold the reins by balancing the state ministry with Patil's opponents. Himachal Pradesh's chief minister was the next to go, and then in August, probably at the urging of Rajiv, Bihar's controversial Jagannath Misra was forced to resign as chief minister.

Congress resilience was evident in the February Delhi polls, where Congress won a solid majority, retaining Sikh and Harijan support, though losing the Muslims to the opposition. Having expected to lead his party to victory in Delhi, BJP president Atal Bihar Vajpayee submitted his resignation. The party leadership refused to accept the resignation, since it refused to accept the Delhi elections result as a bellwether for Congress resurgence. The Assam elections later that month brought Congress victory, but in the context of boycott and violence, the government gained nether legitimacy nor respect. The next assembly elections were in June in Jammu and Kashmir. The Congress, as expected, lost to the incumbent National Conference. In the Hindu-majority Jammu constituencies, however, Congress emerged as the favored party over the BJP—in part because the R.S.S., as it had in Delhi elections, withheld active support for its traditional BJP cohort and may have, as some believed, tacitly backed the Congress. In its campaign appeal to Hindu sentiment, in which Indira Gandhi joined, the Congress deepened Hindu-Muslim enmity in the volatile state and drove the state chief minister Farooq Abdullah—once a potential ally—firmly into the opposition camp. Also in June, the Congress scored major victories over the BJP in municipal elections in Madhya Pradesh, and in the Uttar Pradesh panchayat (village) elections, the Congress overwhelmed both the Lok Dal and the BJP. In the West Bengal panchayat elections, the Congress made important inroads into the rural base of the ruling Communist Party–Marxist.

Any attempt to discern a pattern in these elections is like reading the entrails of a sheep. Local issues predominate, and even in the simultaneous defeat of Congress in Andhra and Karnataka, the party lost each state for different reasons. And the party's victory in Delhi a month later was again highly idiosyncratic. Even in organizational disarray, Congress shows resilience, and it remains the only genuinely national party. Congress defeats, however, bolstered the fragmented opposition parties in their attempt to come together. In May Andhra Chief Minister T. N. Rama Rao gathered 24 leaders of 14 opposition parties at Vijayawada to discuss their common interests, including Maneka Gandhi, the Prime Minister's disaffected daughter-in-law. Earlier, in March, Maneka—more a nuisance than a political threat—had launched the Rashtriya Sanjay

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Manch, a political party built on the memory of her late husband, Sanjay Gandhi. The opposition conclave spanned the ideological spectrum, and the Communists and the BJP used the occasion to take jabs at each other. Setting aside their differences, however, the parties adopted a statement sharply critical of Indira Gandhi and, in an expression favorable to regional sentiment, called for greater autonomy for the states—a likely theme for opposition unity.

Pursuant to their agreement, opposition leaders again met in June in Delhi and in October in Srinagar in Kashmir. A fourth conclave, hosted by the CPM's Jyoti Basu, met at the end of the year in Calcutta. But the difficulties of achieving opposition unity were underscored by the failure of the BJP to attend the Delhi meeting and by the absence of both the BJP and the Lok Dal from Srinagar. In August the Lok Dal (the peasant-based party led by Charan Singh) and the BJP—together a major force in North India—formed the National Democratic Alliance. A month later, four parties came together to form a United Front: the Congress (S), with strength in Maharashtra; the Democratic Socialist Party, with a Muslim following and a base in Uttar Pradesh; the Rashtriya Congress, the Gujarat splinter; and, at the helm, the Janata Party. Remaining outside, at least for the time being, the Telegu Desam, the National Conference, and the two Communist parties indicated their support for the Front. Front leaders were also attempting to break the National Democratic Alliance—to wean away the Lok Dal and to isolate the BJP. But the United Front itself faces internal dissension, reminiscent of the factional feuds that brought down the Janata government in 1979 and hardly likely to enhance the credibility of opposition unity efforts.

Janata president Chandra Sekhar gained national attention earlier in the year by his six-month, 4,000 kilometer *padayatra* (walk) from Cape Camorin to New Delhi to dramatize the party's concern for the rural poor and to call for a restoration of moral values to national life. But while projecting himself as the next Prime Minister of India, he commands little control over his own party. The Janata is factionally divided, and more conservative leaders, such as former Prime Minister Morarji Desai and Subramaniam Swamy, oppose the socialist thrust of the party and look with particular distaste on the influence of H. N. Bahuguna, the ambitious DSP leader, within the United Front.

The opposition has yet to provide a national alternative to Congress. It remains divided, with two fronts, two Communist parties, and an array of regional and personal parties. The attempt to build a "left and democratic" front, excluding the BJP, is not likely to provide that alternative. Despite its electoral losses in 1983, the BJP remains the strongest non-Communist opposition party, and an opposition alliance that does not include the BJP will be unlikely to displace Indira Gandhi.

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The Economy

After a year of low growth, principally the result of drought and world recession, projections for 1983–84 anticipate an increase of 5.5% in real national income, sustaining a high level of confidence in the performance of the Indian economy. Even the growth rate of 1.8% in 1982–83, however, can be taken as an achievement. Despite serious drought, agricultural production declined by only 4–6%—a testament to the modern inputs and expanded irrigation that have made India less vulnerable to monsoon failure. Industrial production, affected by power shortages, the Bombay textile strike, and world recession, was down in 1982–83 by 3.8%. On the power front, drought took its toll on hydroelectric output—and Madras faced not only power cuts that reduced industrial production but water scarcity so severe that there was talk of a partial evacuation of the city. Overall, even with deficient hydroelectric output, power generation grew by 7%; coal production expanded by 4%, and petroleum production was up an impressive 32%—easing the burden of India's staggering oil import bill. Power, however, remains a serious bottleneck, as demand outstrips capacity.

Projections for 1983–84 are favorable by almost every indicator except inflation, which in 1983 was again on the rise at an annual rate of about 11%. But good monsoons and expected bumper crops of rice, wheat, and pulses—an estimated food grains record of 141 million tons—should stabilize prices. Industrial output remains sluggish, but production is likely to improve following the good monsoon, filling hydroelectric reservoirs and expanding farmer's purchasing power. The end of the Bombay textile strike and an upswing in the international economy should also contribute to higher industrial growth. Public sector performance remains generally poor and commands little confidence, but the private sector—buoyed by the liberalized economic policy—shows considerable dynamism.

Pressure on foreign exchange eased somewhat as the trade deficit declined, the result of both increased exports and a significant decline in imports. India continues to face loan requirements to sustain economic growth, and now with limited access to concessional loans, India has been forced to borrow at higher rates of interest. The Government of India, however, even as it faces higher debt service, expressed the determination to avoid the "debt trap" that has brought so many other developing nations to the brink of bankruptcy.

Foreign Relations

India's international relations in 1983 were bracketed by two major meetings in New Delhi—the 101-nation summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in March and the Commonwealth Conference in

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November. In taking the chair of the NAM for a three-year tenure, India sought to set a moderate and pragmatic tone. This was reflected in the sober economic resolution calling for North-South cooperation, but the pointedly anti-American political resolution was hardly calculated to warm the industrial nations to the NAM's economic appeal.

India, however, remained on course in its own efforts to balance relations with the superpowers and, as demonstrated by continued arms purchases from the West, to reduce its dependence upon the Soviet Union. In July U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz visited India, albeit briefly, to keep the Washington–New Delhi dialogue going. In an atmosphere of rapport tempered by frankness, India reiterated its concerns about the U.S. supply of arms to Pakistan and American resistance to India's efforts to secure concessional loans from the multilateral development banks. The U.S. policy is to reserve concessional loans for the poorest developing nations and to graduate more advanced nations like India to the hard loan windows of the World Bank and to the commercial banks. The commercial banks are pushing the policy, since they are eager to make loans to India—a nation with a low debt service ratio and a record of no defaults. New Delhi's response is that the U.S. is punishing India for its fiscal responsibility, while rewarding the profligate with concessional loans. If discussions underscored the differences between the two nations, Shultz eased at least one concern with the announcement that the U.S. would allow India to buy spare parts for the Tarapur nuclear reactor from a third party (Germany later agreed), with the U.S. as a source of last resort. Rumblings of opposition from the U.S. Congress, together with the unresolved question of India's right to reprocess spent fuel, however, left no doubt that Indo-American difficulties over Tarapur are far from over.

Within the region, the foreign ministers of seven South Asian nations (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives) gave their formal assent to the promotion of "collective self-reliance" in nine fields, including agriculture, health, rural development, transport, and telecommunications, at a meeting in New Delhi in August. South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC), however, will keep its distance from political and strategic questions, and many essentially multilateral problems, such as water resource development, are unlikely to be moved from the bilateral level upon which India has insisted.

As the foreign ministers gathered to talk of regional cooperation, Sri Lanka erupted in Sinhalese-Tamil violence. A press report from Sri Lanka said that President Jayewardene feared armed Indian intervention to protect the Tamils and had appealed to the United States, Britain, Pakistan, and Bangladesh for military assistance in the event of an inva-

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sion. No such Indian intervention was seriously contemplated, and throughout what could easily have become an international crisis, India acted with restraint. Nothing, however, could have been more calculated to raise Indian alarm than the prospect of outside involvement in Sri Lanka. New Delhi's response involved the enunciation of a doctrine of regional security: India will not intervene in the internal conflicts of a South Asian nation and strongly opposes such intervention by any other country. India will not tolerate intervention in a South Asian nation if there is any anti-Indian implication, and if external assistance is required to deal with serious internal conflict, help should be sought from a number of countries within the region, including India.

India's talk of "noninterference" was not altogether matched by its public criticism of military rule in Pakistan and, amidst unrest in Sind, by Indira Gandhi's statement of support for the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy. Pakistani anger was compounded by a conference on Sindi culture held in New Delhi that was addressed by Indira Gandhi. For its part, India protested the stridently anti-Indian press in Pakistan and the implication by President Zia that India was behind the agitations in Sind. The "foreign hand" accusation was also raised against Pakistan, as Rajiv and some Indian officials—to considerable skepticism of the Indian press—proffered the notion that Pakistan was providing training, arms, and sanctuary to Sikh extremists seeking an independent Khalistan. Although neither Zia nor Gandhi were prepared to shut the door to continued negotiations on the no-war pact and friendship treaty proposals, mutual accusations had strained relations and seriously set back the movement toward detente.

In September Indira Gandhi was again on high ground diplomatically in her role as chair of the NAM. In a speech before the United Nations General Assembly and in an informal gathering of 24 heads of state, most from the nonaligned nations, Gandhi called for expanded loans to developing countries and, more fundamental, structural change of international economic institutions—themes she again pursued in hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in New Delhi in November. Queen Elizabeth, on a state visit to India, gave a royal touch to the Commonwealth Conference, and Indira Gandhi, undaunted by problems at home, held court with style and vigor.

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