

INDIA IN THE POST-GANDHI-NEHRU ERA

By Prof. Aswini K. Ray

Prof. Aswini K. Ray is the Chairman of the Centre for Political Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) of India.

The assassinated former Prime Minister of India, Rajib Gandhi was young, dynamic and, from all accounts, a devote son, loving husband, and affectionate father. But these attributes of his character, despite their elemental populist appeal, as borne out by the local obituary references, did not mark him out as being strikingly distinctive even among the breed of political species in the country, or beyond it for that matter. What distinguished him among the political leaders in India was his unique inheritance: a judicious blend of striking good looks - a product of generations of selective genetic hybridisation in the true blue Brahminical tradition - along with his considerable wealth and the aura of the Gandhi - Nehru legacy.

This inheritance almost predestined him also to inherit the leadership of the Congress party after it had been personally appropriated by his mother who suffixed her own name to the party before gifting it to her sons by turn. The surrogates constituting the party - which, incidentally included some of his grandfather's contemporaries - referred to this inheritance as his charisma, and the leader, habitually as the "high-command" (names of revered individuals, like deities, are usually taboos in Hindu practice); within the country, and abroad, the Congress continued to be referred as a political party to conform to the demands of western political theory.

Through prolonged use, and misuse, by the hyped media dominated by the new generation of Yuppies gloating over the consumerist culture unleashed in the Rajib era, and the accolades of the west since his initiatives towards economic liberalisation, a miniature version of the family charisma had come to stick with Rajib's leadership. This explains the unchallenged rule of Rajib Gandhi over the organisation which went by the euphemism of the Congress party, and the crippling servility of its members to this

political greenhorn who appeared to be more at ease when pursuing some of the innocent pleasures in the company of his many Yuppie friends than while undertaking the rigours of India's active politics.

In many ways, the mystique of the Nehru-Gandhi legacy, meticulously nursed and bequeathed through generations, at the apex, provided some continuity to Indian politics, linking it - albeit tenuously - with the political culture of the liberation struggle whose many historical landmarks continued to be recurrently orchestrated often as caricatures and as often as parodies. But this artificially contrived link contributed to relative political stability - for whatever it is worth in India's predominantly oppressive traditional social hierarchy - in spite of its manifest institutional inadequacies, with many of its post-colonial democratic institutions at various stages of terminal atrophy. The fell swoop at Sriperumbudur suddenly snapped - for the time being at least - the political system's physical link with the past. This possibly partially explains the widespread sense of bewilderment in the country at Rajib's death, somewhat comparable to a group of quarrelling adolescents suddenly faced with the reality of their orphanhood. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the widely articulated sense of political despair, cutting across the sharp party-divides, for a leader with such a limited, mediocre, and reluctant role in the national politics. This may also explain the initial attempts to pass on the mantle of party-leadership to his reluctant widow - even before the husband's dead body was cremated - arguably, as some sort of a Regency on behalf of their adolescent children.

Viewed in this perspective - though somewhat sharply formulated for reasons of space - some of the general structural distortions of contemporary Indian political economy, as well as its more specific vulnerability caused by the

senseless assassination of Rajib Gandhi appears understood in bold relief. Despite its relatively long functioning democracy - which Galbraith described as "functioning anarchy" - the narrow social base of democratic consciousness in India's post-colonial democracy, and its democratic institutions of development and conflict-resolution at indifferent levels of professional efficiency and ethics; fractured party-system; dysfunctional federal structure; strident political assertion of revivalist social identities; increasing social and political violence; proliferating instruments of the coercive apparatus of the state and increasingly repressive law, are all part of the continuing existential realities within the political system. So also is the burgeoning economic crisis, now accentuated by the Balance of Payments situation necessitating the IMF loan along with its predictable conditionalities of structural reform implying hard domestic political options. In all these spheres, except the BOP difficulties accentuated by Rajib Gandhi's nervous burst of energy to leap-frog into the Twentyfirst century before time, most other problems have been building up over the years; they were bad enough when Rajib joined politics, and worse when he was killed. His sudden death added the new element of a crisis of political leadership to the mounting complexities of Indian political economy. To put it sharply, again, for the first time after the national liberation, India's post-colonial political economy with the multi-tiered crisis of its structural distortions without the mitigating influence of any charismatic leader with physical linkage with the vestigial remains of its post-colonial political culture. This, as it were; has suddenly catapulted Indian politics into the post-modern era, face-to-face with the existential realities of the all-encompassing crisis without the crutches of history that has for so long provided support to the collective national psyche, and so artificially.

Yet, all indicators in the month since the assassination suggest that the political system has adjusted well to the grim realities of the challenge. The Congress party has tangibly benefitted out of its leader's death than from his life. From all evidence, the party won more votes, and seats, from the 'sympathy-wave', though

still not enough for a clear majority in the national parliament. Besides, after a long time, faced with the unfamiliar task of actually choosing a new leader, the party – after some initial hiccups – reverted to the practice of the pre – Mrs Indira Gandhi era of a “consensus” as apart from a secret ballot. Even this limited concession to democratic norms resulted in the choice of a leader, for the first time, from outside the Hindi-hindu heartland of Uttar Pradesh. Both these developments, in the context of the party's recent past, could be termed somewhat revolutionary, brought about by the barest minimum of democratic norms associated with any political party worth the name; and both bode well for the future of the party, and the political system of the country in general.

There are also other indications of the reassertion of the primacy of politics – in its classical sense – of a struggle for power among individuals and groups without the mediation of born leaders rather than the exception, in Indian politics in the foreseeable future, as the CPM leader, EMS Namboodiripad, rightly emphasised. Such coalition politics would, axiomatically, root national politics more firmly within the centrist space, and put a greater premium of consensual form of decision-making than has been the case since Mrs. Indira Gandhi split the Congress party in the mid-sixties. Since the phenomenal range of diversity of India's multinational society offers limited options for repressive management of conflict-situations in spite of the manifest weakness of its democratic institutions – as the mercifully brief Emergency experiment of Mrs. Indira Gandhi so forcefully demonstrated – such structural compulsions for the primacy of the consensual political process bodes well for purposes of nation-building. The absence of any leadership with charismatic pretensions is likely to help the process.

In the macro-economic sphere, Rajib Gandhi's death has not brought about any qualitative transformation in the range of available policy-options. The reality of the economic crisis, and the unavailability of the IMF loans, with its unpredictable conditionalities of structural reforms, is likely to pressurise the Indian economy increasingly in direction of the other ‘Third

World’ – stereotypes, except for the structural compulsions of consensual politics in the specificity of India's social plurality.

Such pressures, and the domestic political implications of the conditionalities, would have its inevitable impact on India's foreign policy. A political economy dependent upon Fund-Bank largesse is unlikely to wield any large measure of autonomy from the only remaining hegemonic power within the global order for it to take any significant initiatives either on global issues, or in the region. But this new constraint is totally unrelated to Rajib Gandhi's death, who, if anything, has now been spared from presiding over this ignominy. Any Indian Prime Minister – even in the unlikely event of a communist one – has limited options on this score. It is in this sense that those who have been widely suspected of plotting his murder seems to have committed a ‘slaughter of the innocent’.

But his assassination may result in a consequence hardly likely to have been intended by his alleged killers: a future Indian Prime Minister is unlikely to be tempted to the adventures in the region that Rajib Gandhi was unfortunately pushed into by the Indian hawks and his own Yuppie advisers. But that would also with inherited charisma. Till now, such a power-struggle, which is the hallmark of democratic politics, never had a fair chance to unfold itself in Indian with in the over-arching, and over-bearing, mystique of the Gandhi-Nehru legacy in its genetic manifestation. Besides, each inheritor of this awesome legacy have reinterpreted it with the stamp of their own personalities. With none of the remaining leaders with any charismatic pretensions, it appears that the personality factor in Indian politics is likely to become a less important factor in national policies, which would also not be too bad for the country.

With the role of personalities playing a less dominant role in national policy-preferences, policy-options would be increasingly more predictable within the structural imperatives of India's political economy. The new Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao said it as much when he recounted in an interview the true version of “politics” being “the art of the possible”. This version of future Indian politics would mean a radical departure from the visionary

phase of Nehruvian idealism, Mrs. Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism, and the technocratic pre-eminence in Rajib Gandhi's policy-preferences. No Indian Prime Minister, in the foreseeable future, has any of the options of his predecessors.

That brings us to some of the specific structural imperatives of contemporary Indian political economy. Firstly, given the stringency of the political assertion of revivalist social identities within India's staggering range of social diversities, it is unrealistic to visualise the emergence of another pan-national party like the Congress in recent times; even the Congress has now been reduced to some regional pockets of influence with little salience in its erstwhile bastion within the ‘Cowbelt’ of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Most other parties, including the two communist parties, are increasingly less distinguishable from one another, and each, with their specific regional salience with India's version of centrist ideological space. Even the Hindu communal BJP is faced with the inevitable dilemma within India's demographic specificity; with their high-pitched ideological offensive around “Hindutva”, they could at best have regional salience as they have found to their cost in the last election; and, if it tones down its ideological stance for a stake in the national leadership it would lose its distinctive identity from other centrist parties.

This scenario, broadly reflected in the results of the last general elections of 1991, makes coalition politics the rule, be good for India, as much as the countries in the region which, by no stretch of imagination, are among the best examples of probity and rectitude in public life. Most of these countries in the region have all the distortions of contemporary Indian political economy, without even the saving graces of the structural compulsions of democratic politics – even India's manifestly inadequate version – which played its role in forcing Rajib Gandhi to resile from some of these misadventures. The post-Gandhi-Nehru era in Indian politics is likely to reinforce the structural pressures within the political system towards greater element of consensual politics with in the large structure of repressive management of dissidence in conformity with the trends of centrist politics in most of the post-colonial world.