

The Janata Interregnum and Indira Gandhi's Second Coming, 1977–1984

Immediately after coming out of the jails in January 1977, the Opposition leaders announced the merger of Congress (O), the Jan Sangh, Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD) and the Socialist Party into the new Janata Party. The Congress was dealt a blow by the sudden defection from it on 2 February 1977 of Jagjivan Ram, H.N. Bahuguna and Nandini Satpathy who formed the Congress for Democracy (CFD). Along with the DMK, Akali Dal and CPM it forged a common front with the Janata Party in order to give a straight fight to Congress and its allies, the CPI and AIADMK, in the March elections to the Lok Sabha.

The Opposition front made the Emergency and its excesses, especially forced sterilizations and the restriction of civil liberties, the major issues of its election campaign. The people also treated the elections as a referendum on the Emergency. With the popular upsurge in favour of them, the Janata Party and its allies were victorious with 330 out of 542 seats. Congress trailed far behind with only 154 seats, with the CPI its ally getting 7 and the AIADMK 21 seats. Congress was virtually wiped out in North India—it won only 2 out of 234 seats in seven northern states. Both Indira Gandhi and Sanjay were defeated. The electoral verdict was, however, mixed in western India. Surprisingly in the South, where the Emergency had been less vigorous, and the pro-poor measures of the Twenty-Point Programme better implemented, Congress improved its performance, winning 92 seats in place of 70 in 1971. Janata won only 6 seats in the four southern states. The CFD merged with the Janata Party immediately after the elections.

There was a near-crisis over the issue of prime ministership between the three aspirants, Morarji Desai, Charan Singh and Jagjivan Ram. The matter was referred to the senior leaders, Jayaprakash Narayan and J.B. Kripalani, who ruled in favour of the 81-year-old Desai, who was sworn in as prime minister on 23 March.

One of the first steps taken by the new government was to try to consolidate its hold over the states. Arguing that in those states where Congress had lost in the national elections, it had also lost the mandate to rule even at the state level, the government dismissed nine Congress-ruled state governments, and ordered fresh elections to their state assemblies. In the assembly elections, held in June 1977, Janata and its allies came out victorious in these states except in Tamil Nadu where AIADMK won. In West Bengal, the CPM, a Janata ally, gained an absolute majority.

Control over both parliament and the state assemblies enabled the Janata Party to elect unopposed its own candidate, N. Sanjeeva Reddy, as the President of the Union in July 1977.

The Janata government took immediate steps to dismantle the authoritarian features of the Emergency regime and to restore liberal democracy. It restored Fundamental Rights and full civil liberties to the Press, political parties and individuals. Through the 44th Constitutional Amendment, it also modified the 42nd Amendment passed during the Emergency, repealing those of its provisions which had distorted the constitution. The right of the Supreme Court and High Courts to decide on the validity of central or state legislation was also restored.

Janata Party in Crisis

The political support to the Janata regime, however, soon began to decline and disillusionment with it set in, given its nonperformance in administration, implementation of developmental policies, and realization of social justice. The political momentum of the regime was lost by the end of 1977 and the uneasy coalition that was the Janata Party began to disintegrate, though the government remained in power till July 1979. By then the lack of confidence in its capacity to govern had begun to turn into anger, for several reasons. First, the Janata Party was not able to deal with the rapidly growing social tensions in rural areas, of which the increasing extent of atrocities on the rural poor and the Scheduled Castes was one manifestation. The Janata Party's social base in North India consisted primarily of rich and middle peasants belonging mostly to intermediate castes and large landowners belonging to upper castes and the urban and rural shopkeepers, small businessmen and the petty bourgeoisie. The rural landowners felt that with the Janata governments at the Centre and the states, they had now unalloyed power in the country as a whole and in rural areas in particular. On the other hand, the rural poor, mostly landless labourers and belonging largely to the Scheduled Castes, too had become conscious of their rights and felt emboldened by the prolonged functioning of democracy and adult franchise. They also defended and asserted the rights and benefits they had obtained under the Twenty-Point Programme. In many states landowners tried to forcibly take back the plots given to them and moneylenders began to reclaim debts cancelled during the Emergency. The result was the wide prevalence of caste tensions and violent attacks on the Scheduled Castes in North India, an early instance being the killing and torching of Harijans at Belchi in Bihar in July 1977.

There was a recrudescence of large-scale communal violence. There were growing agitations, lawlessness and violence which particularly affected colleges and universities, often leading to their closure. The middle of 1979 also witnessed a wave of strikes and mutinies by policemen and paramilitary forces.

Next, the Janata regime explicitly repudiated the Nehruvian vision of rapid economic development based on large-scale industry, modern agriculture, and advanced science and technology. But it failed to evolve any alternative strategy or model of economic and political development to deal with the problems of economic underdevelopment.

Janata's economic policy merely counterposed rural development to industry-oriented growth. This policy came to be based on three pillars: labour-intensive small-scale industry, not as complementary to but in place of large-scale industry; decentralization in place of national planning; and rich-peasant-led agricultural development based on generous subsidies, reduction in land revenue, and massive shift of resources from industry to the rural sector. This shift in economic policy was a recipe for low or non-economic development.

Interestingly, the Janata Party made no effort to fulfil its earlier radical demands for land reform and payment of higher wages to agricultural labourers. The one positive economic step that the Janata government did undertake was the effort to provide employment to the rural unemployed through the 'Food for Work' programme, which was used to improve village

infrastructure such as roads, school buildings, etc., and which was particularly efficiently implemented by the CPM government in West Bengal.

After the first year of Janata rule, the economy started drifting with both agriculture and industry showing stagnation or low rates of growth. Severe drought conditions and devastating floods in several states affected agricultural production in 1978 and 1979. Prices began to rise sharply, especially as foodgrain stocks had been used up in the 'Food for Work' programme. International prices of petroleum and petroleum products again rose steeply. The heavy deficit financing in the 1979 budget, presented by Charan Singh as Finance Minister, also had a marked inflationary impact. The year 1979 also witnessed widespread shortages of kerosene and other goods of daily consumption. By the end of that year, inflation had gone beyond 20 per cent.

The Janata government's tenure was too brief for it to leave much of an impact on India's foreign policy, though while continuing to function within the existing, widely accepted framework it did try to reorient foreign policy. It talked of 'genuine non-alignment' which meant strengthening ties with the US and Britain and moderating its close relations with the Soviet Union.

Holding the party together seems to have been a major preoccupation of the Janata leaders. Already disintegrating by the end of 1977, by 1978–79, the government, lacking all direction, was completely paralysed by the constant bickering and infighting in the party both at the Centre and in the states. Each political component tried to occupy as much political and administrative space as possible. In the ideological sphere, the Jan Sangh tried to promote its communal agenda via textbooks and recruitment to the official media, educational institutions and the police. The Janata Party remained a coalition of different parties and groups and was a victim of factionalism, manipulation and personal ambitions of its leaders. The different constituents were too disparate historically, ideologically and programmatically; bound only by an anti-Indira Gandhi sentiment and the desire for power. The Jan Sangh, its best organized and dominant component with ninety MPs, was communal and populist with umbilical ties to the RSS which provided it with cadres and ideology and which was not willing to let it be incorporated in or integrated with other parties. Congress (O) was secular but conservative and basically Congress in mentality. BLD was secular, but a strictly rich-peasant party with no all-India or developmental vision. The Socialists were largely ideology-less and rootless except in Bihar.

The Revival of the Congress

In the meantime, the Congress witnessed both a split and a revival. Feeling that Indira Gandhi was not only a spent force but, much worse, a serious political liability, a large number of established Congress leaders, led by Y.B. Chavan and Brahmanand Reddy, turned against her. She, in turn, split the party in January 1978, with her wing being known as Congress (I) (for Indira), and the other later as Congress (U) (for Devraj Urs).

Thereafter, Indira Gandhi's political fortunes began to revive and in the February 1978 elections to state assemblies Congress (I) defeated both Janata and the rival Congress in Karnataka and Andhra. There were two reasons for this revival. One was the Janata government's effort to wreak vengeance on Indira Gandhi and punish her for the happenings of

the Emergency. Several commissions of enquiry—the most famous being the Shah Commission—were appointed to investigate and pinpoint the malpractices, excesses, abuses and atrocities committed by Indira Gandhi and the officials during the Emergency. In 1979, special courts were set up to try her for alleged criminal acts during the Emergency. The common people, on the other hand, began to increasingly view Indira Gandhi's persecution not as justice but as revenge and vendetta and an effort to disgrace her. They felt she had already been punished enough by being voted out of power. Moreover, deep down, the rural and urban poor, Harijans, minorities and women still considered Indira Gandhi as their saviour, their Indira Amma or Mother Indira.

However, the government remained ignorant of Indira Gandhi's growing popularity, thanks to the bias of the Press against her. A dramatic demonstration of her growing popularity came when she won a parliament seat with a large margin from the Chikamagalur constituency in Karnataka in November 1978. Ironically, soon after, on 19 December, Janata used its majority to expel her from parliament for breach of privilege and contempt of the house on a minor charge and committed her to jail for a week.

The factional struggle in the Janata government and the party took an acute form in the middle of 1979. Charan Singh, the Home Minister, had been forced to resign from the cabinet on 30 June 1978 and was then brought back as Finance Minister in January 1979. He broke up the party and the government in July with the help of the Socialists, who walked out of the party and the government on the refusal of the Jan Sangh members to give up their dual membership of the Janata Party and the RSS. Having been reduced to a minority, Morarji Desai's government resigned on 15 July. A week later, Charan Singh formed the government in alliance with the Chavan-wing of Congress (U) and some of the Socialists and with the outside support of Congress (I) and the CPI. But he never got to face parliament as, on 20 August, a day before the confidence vote, Indira Gandhi withdrew her support after Charan Singh rejected her demand for the scrapping of special courts set up to prosecute her. On Charan Singh's advice, the President dissolved the Lok Sabha and announced mid-term elections.

The elections, held in January 1980, were fought primarily between Congress (I), Congress (U), the Lok Dal, the new party floated by Charan Singh and the Socialists, and Janata, now consisting primarily of the Jan Sangh and a handful of old Congressmen such as Jagjivan Ram and Chandra Shekhar; the CPM and CPI were not in the picture except in West Bengal and Kerala. Having been disenchanted with Janata's non-governance, lack of vision and incessant mutual quarrels, the people once again turned to Congress and Indira Gandhi, perceiving her Congress to be the real Congress.

The Janata Party's main appeal consisted of warnings against the threat to democracy and civil liberties if Indira Gandhi came back to power. Charan Singh talked of 'peasant raj'. Indira Gandhi concentrated on Janata's non-governance, asking the people to vote for 'a government that works'.

The people, once again cutting across caste, religion and region as in 1971 and 1977, gave a massive mandate to Congress (I), which secured 353 out of 529 seats, that is, a two-thirds majority. The Lok Dal with 41, Janata with 31 and Congress (U) with 13 lagged far behind. The CPM and CPI alone withstood the Congress tide and won 36 and 11 seats respectively.

After the elections, the Janata Party split once again, with the old Jan Sangh leaders leaving it to form the Bharatiya Janata Party at the end of 1980 and Jagjivan Ram joining Congress (U).

Indira Gandhi's Return

After having been out of office for thirty-four months, Indira Gandhi was once again the prime minister and Congress was restored to its old position as the dominant party. Following the wrong precedent set up by the Janata government in 1977, the Congress government dissolved the nine state assemblies in the opposition-ruled states. In the assembly elections, subsequently held in June, Congress swept the polls except in Tamil Nadu. It now ruled fifteen of the twenty-two states.

Though once again the prime minister and the only Indian leader with a national appeal, Indira Gandhi was no longer the same person she had been from 1969 to 1977. She no longer had a firm grasp over politics and administration. Despite enjoying unchallenged power, she dithered in taking significant new policy initiatives or dealing effectively with a number of disturbing problems. She did, however, still manage some success in the fields of economic and foreign policy. But, on the whole, there was a lack of direction and a sense of drift, which led to a feeling among the people that not much was being achieved. The Emergency and the Janata years had left their mark on her. She was suspicious of people around her and trusted none but her son, Sanjay. Her earlier energy, decisiveness and determination were replaced by 'an approach of hesitation and caution'. As time passed she showed signs of being a tired person.

Besides, Indira Gandhi had few political instruments to implement her election promises. Most of the well-known and experienced national and state leaders and her colleagues of the past had deserted her during 1977-78. With a few exceptions, the political leaders around her, in the Centre as also in the states, were raw untried men and women, none of whom had a political base of their own and who had been chosen more for their loyalty than for their administrative or political capacities.

Sanjay Gandhi's death while flying a stunt plane on 23 June 1980 left her shaken and further weakened. She tried to fill his place with her elder son, Rajiv Gandhi, who was brought into politics, got elected as an MP and then appointed as the general secretary of the party in 1983.

Like the first one, a major weakness of Indira's second prime ministerial innings was the continuing organizational weakness of Congress and her failure to rebuild it and strengthen its structure. This inevitably affected the performance of the government and its popularity, for a weak party structure meant the choking of channels through which popular feelings could be conveyed to the leadership and the nature and rationale of government policies explained to the people.

Despite Indira Gandhi's total domination of the party and the government, the central leadership of the party again faced the problem of continuous factionalism and infighting—in fact, virtual civil war within the state units of the party and the state governments. One result of this infighting and the consequent frequent rise and fall of chief ministers was that party

organizational elections were repeatedly postponed and, in the end, not held. Another result was the erosion of the feeling that Congress could provide state governments that worked. Organizational weakness also began to erode the party's support and adversely affect its electoral performance, with dissidents often sabotaging the prospects of the official party candidates.

An example of this erosion of the party's popularity was the serious electoral defeat it suffered in January 1983 in the elections to the state assemblies of Andhra and Karnataka, the two states which Congress had ruled continuously since their inception. In Andhra, Congress suffered a massive defeat at the hands of the newly formed Telugu Desam Party (TDP), led by the film-starturned politician N.T. Rama Rao. The Congress won only 60 seats against TDP's 202. In Karnataka, a Janata-led front won 95 seats in the 224-seat assembly, with Congress getting 81 seats.

While facing hardly any challenge at the Centre from Opposition parties, from the beginning of her second prime ministership Indira Gandhi faced certain intractable problems arising out of communal, linguistic and caste conflicts; none of these was dealt with firmly and with insight and all of them were to drag on for years. Three of the most serious of these, Kashmir, Assam and Punjab, are discussed in other chapters in this book. Communalism grew stronger because of the momentum it gained during 1977-79. Its overt manifestation was communal riots, which spanned all the years from 1980 to 1984 and beyond and which began to engulf even South India.

Similarly, atrocities on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes continued as they began to assert their social and constitutional rights. However, administrative and judicial action, which included long terms of imprisonment, was taken in some cases against the perpetrators of the atrocities.

Though hesitatingly, India once again resumed its tasks of planning and economic development, with greater financial allocations being made for the purpose. The government also took note of the changes in world economy and their impact on India and, while making efforts to strengthen the public sector, initiated measures for what has come to be known as economic liberalization. But, the government proceeded very gradually and hesitatingly because Indira Gandhi was worried about the role of multinational corporations in eroding India's self-reliance. The government, however, succeeded in raising the rate of economic growth to over 4 per cent per year, with a large increase in agricultural and petroleum crude production, and in gradually bringing down the rate of inflation to 7 per cent in 1984.

Indira Gandhi's government also achieved some success in foreign policy. In March 1983, India hosted the seventh summit of the Non-Aligned Movement with Indira Gandhi as its chairman. As formal leader of the Non-Aligned Movement she actively worked for a new international economic order that would be more fair to the developing countries.

When on 26 December 1979 the Soviet Union sent its troops into Afghanistan to help its beleaguered government, Mrs Gandhi refused to condemn the action but, at the same time, she advised the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan as speedily as possible. She, however, opposed the indirect intervention in Afghanistan's civil war by the United States and Pakistan. Mrs Gandhi's stand on the Afghanistan issue was determined by India's long-term

friendship and 'special' relationship with the Soviet Union and India's strategic interest in preventing Afghanistan from having an administration hostile to India.

Indira Gandhi tried to improve India's relations with the US despite its tilt towards Pakistan. She also tried to normalize relations with China and Pakistan, despite the latter's support to the terrorists in Punjab. She did not, however, hesitate to order the army in April 1984 to deploy a brigade at the Siachen glacier along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir.

On the morning of 31 October 1984, Indira Gandhi's long tenure as prime minister was brought to an end by her assassination by two Sikh members of her security guard. The Congress Parliamentary Board immediately nominated her forty-year-old son, Rajiv Gandhi, as prime minister.

Indira Gandhi—An Evaluation

Any assessment of Indira Gandhi has to acknowledge that she was a highly complex person, full of contradictions, which made her extremely controversial. During her twenty years in power she made immense contributions and exhibited many remarkable features of her political personality and approach. Of course, there were major weaknesses, but these, as well as her strengths, are to be seen in light of how she changed over the years.

Indira Gandhi possessed great political skill which she continuously developed over time as she faced new situations and challenges. Though in the habit of soliciting opinion and advice from all around her, she herself invariably made the final decision. For all of her political life, Indira Gandhi conducted herself with fierce courage. She, as also her political opponents, were quite conscious of this quality of hers. Possessed of extraordinary will, as a political fighter Indira Gandhi was tough, resolute, decisive and, when necessary, ruthless. Though quite cautious by nature and temperament, when necessary she acted boldly, swiftly, with a superb sense of timing, and decisively, as for example in the case of the Congress split in 1969, the Bangladesh crisis in 1971, the defiance of the US decision to send the Seventh Fleet to the Bay of Bengal in December 1971, the creation of the Punjabi Suba in 1966, the imposition of the Emergency in 1975, and the Janata's persecution of her through enquiry commissions during 1977–79.

A major feature of Indira Gandhi's politics was her identification with and her passionate love of the country and its people, her pride in India's greatness and confidence in its future. Indira Gandhi was acutely aware of India's national interests and committed to maintaining its prestige among the community of nations.

Fully realizing that real national greatness and independence lie in a country's inherent strength, she strove hard and successfully, in the face of many dire domestic economic and political problems, to make India economically, politically, culturally, technologically and militarily self-reliant and independent and to give the country confidence in its ability to do so. India under her leadership was one of the few countries to overcome the oil shock of the 1970s. The success of the Green Revolution made India self-sufficient in foodgrains and broke its dependence on food imports. Throughout the Nehru and Indira Gandhi years India was shielded from the

recessionary cycles common in other capitalist economies.

Indira Gandhi used her firm grasp of world politics to ensure that there was no successful overt or covert foreign interference in India's internal affairs. She kept India free of both the Cold War blocs and the two superpowers. While adhering to the policy of not going nuclear, she refused to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty even though it was sponsored by both the United States and the Soviet Union. She strengthened the foreign policy carefully crafted by Nehru.

Indira Gandhi also actively promoted the process of nation-in-the-making, strengthened the country's unity, held it together during a difficult period, and in the end gave her life for the purpose. With all her flaws and failures, she left the country stronger and more self-confident than it was when she took command of it in 1966.

Indira Gandhi was pragmatic and lacked Nehru's ideological moorings, but she remained committed to a progressive, reformist, left-of-centre political orientation. In the economic field she remained loyal to the Nehruvian objective of rapid economic development and strengthened planning and the public sector while maintaining a mixed economy and, except for the brief period of 1971–74, a healthy private sector though under rigid state control. She, however, tried to relax this control gradually—perhaps too gradually—during 1980–84.

Ideologically, she remained true to the national movement's secular tradition and consistently opposed the communal forces, looking upon the RSS, in particular, as a great menace to the unity and integrity of the country and to its democratic polity. Her firm commitment to secularism was shown by her insistence on making Dr Zakir Hussain, a Muslim, the country's President and when she countermanded the order to remove from duty her Sikh security guards in October 1984, on the ground that India was a secular country. For the latter decision she paid with her life.

Indira Gandhi's major political asset was her empathy and affection for the poor, the underprivileged and the minorities, concern for their social condition and an unmatched capacity to communicate directly with them. The poor, in turn, almost throughout her political career, looked upon her as their saviour and gave her immense love and trust. There is also no doubt that Indira Gandhi played an important role in politicizing the people, especially in making the poor, the Harijans and tribals, the minorities and women aware of their social condition and its underlying unjust character, and in arousing consciousness of their interests and the political power that inhered in them.

However, in spite of all the power that she wielded for over sixteen years, Indira Gandhi achieved little in terms of institutional development, administrative improvement, management of the political system and far-reaching socio-economic change. Her crucial weakness as a political leader lay in the absence of any strategic design and long-term perspective around which her economic, political and administrative policies were framed. As mentioned earlier, she was a master of political tactics and their timing, without match among her contemporaries. But her brilliant tactics were at no stage components of a pre-conceived strategy. Even the imposition of the Emergency was not part of an alternative strategic design for managing the political system but merely an *ad hoc* response to a situation of crisis. But tactics, however sound, cannot suffice in themselves. They are the short-term, issue-to-issue policies through which a strategy is

implemented. Without a strategy, tactics, however brilliant, hang in the air. They do not even help formulate policies which are adequate to the achievement of the proclaimed objectives of a leadership or which enable it to move a country towards the desired destination.

In economic development and foreign policy, the Nehruvian strategies were there to guide her and after some initial vacillation Indira Gandhi went back to them. For management of the political system, or even overcoming the instability of the state, or development of the administrative structure or at least preventing its downslide, there were no clear-cut or specific strategies upon which to fall back and Indira Gandhi failed to evolve any of her own. She did not creatively develop Nehru's strategy even in the field of economic policy to meet a changed national and world economic situation as is evident from her hesitant efforts to relax the licence-quota-regulation regime. Similarly, she failed to evolve a strategic framework to deal with communalism and separatism, resulting in her failure to deal effectively with the Punjab, Assam and Kashmir problems.

The consequences of Indira Gandhi's failure to evolve and function within a strategic framework were felt in several other fields also. Despite massive electoral majorities, Indira Gandhi was not able to make the institutional changes in political or governmental apparatus—parliament, cabinet, police or bureaucracy or Congress party or the educational system—needed to implement her own agenda. Not only did she not build any new institutions or make any effort to reform or strengthen old ones, much worse, she made little effort to check the erosion in most institutions and, in fact, contributed to the decay of some. As a result, increasingly over time, Indira Gandhi came to rely on personal power rather than on political and administrative institutions. She concentrated and centralized authority and decision-making in the party and the government in her hands. She systematically undermined her own party leaders who had an independent political base of their own, and chose as chief ministers persons who could not survive without her support. One result of this was that the power and influence of the chief ministers declined over the years. Moreover, not having a political base of their own, these candidates were victims of continuous factionalism in the party at the state level. Indira Gandhi was forced to replace them frequently, creating instability in the administration and the party organization in the state. Her time was taken up in day-to-day fire-fighting of problems relating to the party and government management; she had no time for evolving strategies and broader policy frameworks for dealing with the serious problems of the country or the party.

It is significant that the only major institution she built up was that of the Prime Minister's Secretariat, which she had inherited from Shastri and which became an independent bureaucratic source of policy, advice and initiative and decision-making, thus severely undermining the autonomous role of the cabinet members.

Nevertheless, despite all the concentration of power in her hands, it would be wrong to say that Indira Gandhi was undemocratic or tried or even wanted to impose an authoritarian regime. Except for the period 1975–77, she functioned within the parliamentary framework and played an important role in India remaining on the democratic path. She accepted, even when she did not like it, the authority of the judiciary. She did not tinker with the Press, even when it subjected her to calumnies, or with academic freedom, even when a large number of academic intellectuals

had become severe critics of her. Even the Emergency was imposed in accord with the provisions of the constitution. Moreover, it was she who lifted the Emergency, announced and held elections, gracefully accepted the verdict of the vote and gave up power—a feat rarely, if at all, performed by dictators.

An example of Indira Gandhi's failure to build up institutions was in respect of the Congress party. She had hardly any capacity or even time for party organization, but was not willing to share the task with others. Even though she replenished the party's social support base, she failed to reorganize and revitalize it after the 1969 split. As a result, it was unable to keep contact with the people except during the elections; and as an organization it gradually decayed, especially at the local and state levels. She ruled supreme in the party—she virtually nominated the party president, members of its Working Committee, heads of its state units and other party organizations. There was also hardly any inner-party democracy and debate on issues, not to speak of criticism of the central leadership. The culture of sycophancy prevailed even after the death of Sanjay Gandhi. However, despite her total supremacy, Indira Gandhi could not prevent the prevalence of intense factionalism in the party at the local and state levels. And, many a time, sycophants turned into rebels and party-splitters when frustrated in their hopes.

Once again, political and tactical skill enabled Indira Gandhi to manage and control the party but she could not accomplish the strategic task of reinvigorating it or building it up as an organization. She did succeed in reaching out to the people and establishing direct contact with them, but only through populist measures and only during electoral campaigns and mass meetings. This could enable her and the party to have dominance in the legislatures and over the government, but it did not make it possible for the party to exercise political hegemony among the people outside the legislatures or keep for long the support gained at the polls. Consequently, through most of her prime ministerial period she was troubled and harassed by popular movements and agitations.

Even though providing some succour and benefits to the poor and oppressed, Indira Gandhi failed to fulfil her promise of bringing about radical socio-economic change or combining economic growth with social justice. In spite of her long tenure, the economy and society did not move much towards greater social and economic equality. In fact, quite the reverse; India of 1984 was more not less inequitable than India of 1966.

This incapacity to move India in the direction of greater egalitarianism was further intensified by her failure to reshape Congress into a popular instrument of political education and mobilization and an agent of social and political transformation. Congress continued to harbour strongly conservative as also radical elements. While the poor and the deprived gave her and Congress massive electoral support in 1971, 1972 and 1980, the composition and structure of the party continued unchanged and perhaps even worsened with the induction of black money and criminals into parties and politics.

A giant of a person, with many strengths and many weaknesses, Indira Gandhi strode the Indian political stage after independence longer than any other leader—longer than even her father—and she was fully justified in telling a friend a few days before her assassination:

‘Whatever happens to me—I feel I have paid all my debts.’¹ And India and its people were surely richer for her having done so.