

## Assuming Office

Rajiv, son of Indira Gandhi and grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, became prime minister of India on the night of 31 October 1985. That morning, Indira had begun to walk from her home to her office to keep an appointment for a television interview with Peter Ustinov. Instead, she met her fate in the person of two Sikh guards who shot at her to take revenge for her ordering the storming of the Golden Temple to flush out Sikh terrorists in June 1984. By the afternoon, Indira was declared dead and, while Rajiv was away in West Bengal, senior Congress leaders had (with the concurrence of the President, Giani Zail Singh, who had rushed back from Yemen) decided to ask Rajiv to become prime minister. A reluctant Rajiv, persuading an even more reluctant Sonia, his Italian-born wife, accepted this decision which would ultimately lead to his tragic death six and a half years later at the hands of a Tamil terrorist suicide bomber.

Rajiv Gandhi, a pilot with Indian Airlines for fourteen years, had kept studiously aloof from politics till the death of his younger brother, Sanjay, in an air crash in June 1980. After Sanjay's death, Indira persuaded him to help her and in June 1981 he formally entered politics by getting elected to the Lok Sabha from Amethi, the constituency in Uttar Pradesh vacated by Sanjay's death. He was placed in charge of organizing the Asian Games in New Delhi in 1982, and by all accounts did a commendable job. In February 1983, he became one of the seven new general secretaries of the Congress, with the responsibility of rejuvenating the Congress at the grassroots, the urgency of the task having been brought home by losses in provincial elections. But the gradual apprenticeship to politics was cut short and he was catapulted into the driving seat. With elections due in a few months, Congress leaders naturally wanted someone who could rally the people. Rajiv, in their judgement, was most likely to harness the sympathy wave generated by Indira's martyrdom.

In the event, they turned out to be correct, and the Congress won by its largest ever majority in the general elections held from 24 to 27 December 1984, a little earlier than scheduled. If the seats won in the polls held later in Punjab and Assam are counted, the party garnered 415 out of 543 Lok Sabha seats. Rajiv himself won by a huge margin from Amethi in Uttar Pradesh, in the process defeating conclusively Sanjay's wife, Maneka, who wanted to establish her claim to Sanjay's legacy. The Congress election campaign had focussed on the threat to India's unity and integrity and, since Indira's death was seen by people as proof of the threat, the response was enormous. The huge majority also meant high, even unreal, expectations, which Rajiv himself once described as 'scary'.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Rajiv was faced with major crises from the outset. He had hardly any time to come to terms with the personal grief of his mother's violent death. As the dignitaries from across the world were arriving in Delhi for Indira Gandhi's funeral, a horrific massacre of Sikhs in revenge for her assassination was taking place in the city, especially on its outskirts in the 'resettlement

colonies' where the poorer sections lived. From 31 October, the day of Indira's death, to 3 November, many Sikhs were attacked, their businesses and houses looted and burnt, and around 2,800 killed.<sup>2</sup> The perpetrators were the poor, usually slum-dwellers, who looked upon Indira as their leader and sympathizer, and were disoriented by her violent death. It has also been alleged that Congress party workers and even some local-level leaders were involved in assisting and guiding the crowd, and that the police at the local level turned a blind eye to what was going on. This allegation has sometimes been enlarged into a broader charge that the Congress, with directions from the top, organized the massacre, a charge that is obviously unfounded and has been impossible to prove. It is also true that thousands of Sikhs were sheltered and protected by Hindu friends and neighbours. The government's delay in bringing the situation under control can only be explained by the confusion following Indira's assassination, with the swearing-in of the new prime minister, the responsibility of arranging the funeral, which was attended by thousands of people, and looking after the foreign guests. It also took a while for the full import of the scale of the massacre to be communicated and understood at the higher levels of the government. On 3 November, the day of the funeral, Rajiv visited some of the affected areas in the morning, and later the army was called in and the violence suppressed. Many voluntary agencies, whose personnel were generally Hindu, worked for months to bring relief to the families of victims. Similar violence, though on a smaller scale, broke out in some other North Indian cities, especially Kanpur and Bokaro.

Within two weeks of his becoming prime minister, there occurred the Bhopal gas leak tragedy, in which around 2,000 people, mostly poor slum-dwellers, lost their lives and many thousands more were taken ill because of poisonous emissions from a chemicals factory run by Union Carbide, a multinational company. The legal battle for compensation dragged on for years in Indian and US courts, and the final settlement was not a generous one, and was further bogged down in bureaucratic delays due to difficulties of identifying the sufferers.

## **The First Round**

Despite these travails, Rajiv's administration took off on a positive note, and a number of policy initiatives were launched. At the political level, he set in motion the process that culminated in the Punjab and Assam accords, which have been discussed elsewhere in the book. But perhaps his most well-known initiative was the setting up of six 'technology missions', something that for many Indians epitomized the new, modern and technological approach of the youthful prime minister. The idea was to apply science and technology to six areas of underdevelopment in which a scientific approach would be useful in solving problems. These target-oriented projects were designated as 'technology missions' and in most cases the arrival of the millennium was set as the target date, the idea being that India must enter the new millennium as a modern nation. The most important of these was the drinking water mission, whose aim was to provide drinking water to all Indian villages, only one-fifth of which had potable water supplies. The idea was to use satellites and the disciplines of geology, civil engineering and biochemistry for identifying, extracting and cleaning water supplies. The literacy mission was aimed at attacking the serious problem of mass illiteracy which almost forty years after independence afflicted almost 60 per

cent of the population. This was to be achieved by making use of and extending the television network in rural areas, as well as by using video and audio cassettes and other methods. In fact, this was probably in the long run the most significant of the missions, as the Total Literacy Campaign that it spawned made a major dent in many regions and brought the whole issue to the centre of political debate. The third mission was targeted at the immunization of pregnant women and children, again an idea that has caught on and is pursued with greater vigour today with the mass campaign for immunization of children against polio being a recent example. The fourth mission was to promote the 'White Revolution', or milk production, by improving the milkyield and health of cows and buffaloes, and this was remarkably successful. India imported a large quantity of edible oils, which added considerably to her foreign exchange deficit, and the fifth mission was charged with the task of expanding edible oil production. The aim of the sixth mission was to bring one telephone to every village in the country by the end of the century.

The man who inspired and helped implement the technology-mission approach was Sam Pitroda, a young US-trained Indian telecommunications expert who had made a fortune in the US from telephone switching systems. He had convinced Mrs Gandhi of the need to set up C-DOT or the Centre for the Development of Telematics, and he now became Rajiv's adviser on technology missions, and Telecom Commission chairman.

A big push was also given by Rajiv to India's computerization programme, which was already being formulated under Mrs Gandhi. Import duties on components were reduced so that domestic producers could enhance production, foreign manufacturers were allowed to enter the home market so that quality and competitive prices were ensured, and use of computers in offices and schools was encouraged. Realizing that the future was at stake, Rajiv ignored much ill-informed debate about the utility of computers in a labour-surplus society, and went ahead with the policy that has stood the country in very good stead, with computer software emerging as a major foreign exchange earner. India had missed out on the industrial revolution because of its colonial status, and it was imperative that she take part in the information and communication revolution (this was a view held by many farsighted Indians, and Rajiv shared it and put his weight behind the effort to make it come real). Efforts at liberalization of controls in the economy as a whole, increase of exports, reduction of import duties, etc. were also made, and these have been discussed elsewhere in the book.

Much lip-service had been paid to the need for doing something to strengthen local self-government institutions. It was Rajiv and his government that took the initiative to deepen and strengthen panchayati institutions by generating debate and bringing forward legislation to make panchayat elections mandatory by giving them a constitutional sanction. This necessitated a constitutional amendment and it was Rajiv's great regret that the Opposition parties, for no good reason, blocked the passage of the bills in the Rajya Sabha where the Congress did not have a majority. As striking as the objective was the process. Between December 1987 and June 1988, Rajiv met 400 district collectors or officers in charge of districts. In July 1988 there was a meeting with chief secretaries, the highest officers of states, in January 1989 a Panchayati Raj Sammelan of 8,000 delegates, followed by a conference on Panchayati Raj for Women in May. The All India Congress Committee discussed and supported the proposals in May 1989, and a

meeting of chief ministers of states was held thereafter. Rajiv could claim with some justice, as he did, that 'never before has a government at the highest level taken so carefully into account the views of so many tens of thousands of people at every level about democracy and development at the grassroots'<sup>3</sup>

Another measure directed at the rural poor was the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana or Employment Plan which aimed at providing employment to at least one member of every rural poor family for 50–100 days in the year. Inaugurated to mark the birth centenary of Jawaharlal Nehru (born in 1889), the central government promised to meet 80 per cent of the cost of the scheme. The new education policy, too, had its focus on the rural areas and the poor, with its main planks being the literacy campaign, Operation Blackboard (which aimed at providing basic amenities to schools) and distance education. The much-reviled Navodaya Vidyalayas, a favourite whipping boy of Rajiv baiters, and cited *ad nauseum* as proof of the elitist nature of Rajiv's education policy, were in fact aimed at providing quality education to the children of poor rural families who were to be chosen by merit for free education and stay in the residential schools to be set up in every district.

The National Perspective Plan for Women was drafted in 1988, and among its important proposals was the reservation of 30 per cent of elected seats for women in all panchayat bodies, which was included in the Panchayati Raj legislation. It also recommended that 50 per cent of grassroots functionaries should be women. The plan addressed issues of women's health and education as well. Legislation strengthening the punishment for dowry-related offences was also passed in 1986.

The protection of the environment was a project close to Rajiv's heart as it had been to his mother's, and among other things he launched a massive effort to clean the river Ganga, the holiest of Indian rivers, which had become shamefully polluted in many parts. He created a new Ministry of Environment and environmental clearance for big projects was made mandatory. At the Non-Aligned Movement's ninth summit, he placed before it the proposal for a Planet Protection Fund to help developing countries access advanced technology for the protection of the environment.

While it became quite fashionable in certain elite circles to berate the cultural policy of the Rajiv government as catering to the West by holding very expensive festivals of India in many Western countries, it was forgotten that at the same time seven zonal cultural centres were set up in different parts of the country to shift the focus of state patronage of the arts away from the capital and encourage local and regional cultural forms. Also, whatever their criticism (there is some truth in the charge of over-enthusiasm leading to precious cultural property being transported abroad and suffering damage, though whether this was a special feature of Rajiv's regime is suspect) the festivals did succeed in placing India on the world cultural map. If one of the legitimate functions of a government is to enhance the standing of the country it governs on the world stage, then the festivals of India fulfilled that function.

There appeared to be a serious effort to clean up the political and bureaucratic system, by introducing greater openness, accountability, and taking legislative and other measures to dissuade

offenders. Among these was the Anti-Defection Act, drafted after discussions with Opposition parties and passed in 1985, which laid down that one-third of the members of a political party in parliament would have to change loyalties for it to be recognized as a split in a party. Any other defections would invite expulsion from the house. This was meant to check the tendency of horse-trading and shifting party loyalties that was becoming a bane of the Indian political system. Lok Adalats, and the Consumer Protection Act were part of the same stream. Greater freedom to government media, especially the increasingly popular television, and encouragement to programmes critical of government and intended to keep ministers and bureaucrats on their toes, carried the prime minister's personal imprint.<sup>4</sup> V.P. Singh's much-advertised raids on business houses, which Rajiv supported, certainly in the beginning, also helped provide the ambience that gave Rajiv the Mr Clean label.

But it was his speech at the centenary celebrations of the Congress in December 1985 that really shook critics and admirers (and at that time there were more admirers than critics, as Rajiv enjoyed a honeymoon for the first eighteen months of his term). Rajiv used the occasion to launch a frontal attack on what he described as the power-brokers who had reduced the great party to a shell of its former self, and promised to rejuvenate it by removing their stranglehold. This was read as a signal to the old leaders to get their act together or else. Many partymen who were otherwise sympathetic to Rajiv's policies did not appreciate his 'disrespectful' style and thought the centenary of the grand old party an inappropriate occasion for this exercise. However, Rajiv was no more successful at holding elections within the party than was his mother or his successor as Congress prime minister. The hold of party bosses at the local level meant that they could register bogus members and manipulate elections, and in the process acquire further legitimacy by virtue of being elected! Rajiv soon also found that he needed to build links with party stalwarts and politics was different from running an efficient corporation. Over time, and partly as his own close advisers, Arun Nehru, Arun Singh and V.P. Singh, were estranged, he brought back old advisers. The process reached full circle in early 1989 with the return of R.K. Dhawan, Mrs Gandhi's close adviser, who epitomized the old system that Rajiv had vowed in his innocence in December 1985 to overturn!

## **Foreign Policy Initiatives**

Rajiv pursued foreign affairs with the energy of an activist, travelling extensively to countries big and small, and participating in a wide range of international fora. He put his own personal stamp on foreign policy, even while pursuing the well-laid-out path of his grandfather and mother. This he did by zealously advocating the causes of nuclear disarmament and the fight against apartheid in South Africa and of Namibian independence. A little while before her death, Indira had formed the Six-Nation Five-Continent Initiative, bringing together heads of government of Argentina, Greece, Mexico, Sweden, Tanzania and India, to put international pressure on the superpowers to reduce weapons and eliminate nuclear weapons. Within a month of winning the elections, Rajiv held the first summit of the six leaders. It is important to remember that this was before Gorbachev's assumption of power and before disarmament was on the agenda of superpower relations. Rajiv met Gorbachev after he took over the reins in the USSR, and found in

him a believer in disarmament. In fact, Rajiv began to hail Gorbachev as a force for peace much before the US woke up to the new leader's new ideas. In November 1986, on the occasion of Gorbachev's visit, he and Rajiv gave a call for a non-violent world, and the Delhi Declaration, as the programme came to be called, set forth a plan for disarmament. The Six Nation Initiative too matured into an Action Plan for Nuclear Disarmament, which Rajiv then presented to the UN General Assembly's third special session on disarmament in June 1988. This plan called for the elimination of all nuclear weapons by 2010.

Close to Rajiv's heart was the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In keeping with tradition (Gandhiji was the first to take up the issue in South Africa in 1893, and Nehru the first to raise it in the UN in the late 1940s, and India the first country to apply sanctions by breaking off trade and diplomatic links), Rajiv took up the cause with fervour, even succeeding in getting the majority in the Commonwealth in favour of sanctions but failing to move an obdurate Mrs Thatcher. More successful was the setting up of the AFRICA (Action for Resisting Invasion, Colonialism and Apartheid) Fund at the Non-Aligned Summit at Harare in 1986. By the Belgrade Non-Aligned Summit meeting three years later, he was able to show a collection of half a billion dollars given by developing and developed countries to help the frontline African states overcome the losses they suffered because of sanctions against South Africa.

Namibian independence was a closely associated cause, Namibia being held as a colony by South Africa. Rajiv extended diplomatic recognition to SWAPO, the organization fighting for Namibian independence, and visited the frontline states of Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola and Tanzania in May 1986, besides adding his voice to the cause at all international gatherings. Namibia got independence in 1990, by which time Rajiv was no longer prime minister, but he attended the celebrations, where he met Nelson Mandela, and thus was able to witness the success of two favourite causes.

Relations with the superpowers improved during Rajiv's tenure, but did not undergo any major change. Contrary to speculation based on the young prime minister's preference for open-market policies and a technocratic bias, Rajiv did not tilt towards the US. His visit to the US in 1985 was a successful one, and he got along well with Reagan, even persuading him to let India have the supercomputer India had been wanting for processing weather data. But with the US committed to supporting Pakistan to promote the Mujahideen against the USSR in Afghanistan, there was little chance of any radical shifts. With Gorbachev, however, a very close relationship developed, and the two leaders met a total of eight times in five years.

Rajiv's visit to China in 1988, the first by an Indian prime minister since Nehru's maiden visit in 1954, was remarkable in that it happened at all. It was also made memorable by television images of Deng holding on to Rajiv's hand for what seemed like an eternity, and by his referring to mistakes made by people of his generation which the new generation represented by Rajiv Gandhi should not repeat. The importance of this meeting was also because there had been a sudden dip in relations in 1986 following some border incidents. The visit was followed by efforts to solve long-standing problems on a regular basis, improvement of trade and extension of consular contacts. India even refrained from condemning the Tiananmen Square massacre of 4 June 1989, clear proof that recent improvements in relations were sought not to be jeopardized.

With immediate neighbours, relations were not very good during Rajiv's time. Bangladesh was moving in a more and more Islamic direction, and disputes over water continued. With Nepal there was trouble when it imposed heavy duties on Indian goods, gave discounts in duties to Chinese goods, received, in 1988, huge amounts of assault rifles and anti-aircraft guns from China and asked Indian residents to get work permits for working in Nepal (this when lakhs of Nepalis work and live in India without any permits). The Indian government imposed what amounted to an economic blockade in March 1989, and by September negotiations for a solution began. Maldives faced a coup attempt, asked for Indian help, which was given and the attempt scotched. With Pakistan, things were much the same despite hopes aroused by Benazir Bhutto becoming prime minister, and Rajiv visiting Pakistan (the first prime minister to do so after Nehru), what with Pakistani support to insurgency in Kashmir and Punjab continuing apace.

In Sri Lanka, however, India got involved in a messy situation from which India found it difficult to extricate herself. The problem began when thousands of Tamils from Sri Lanka fled to Tamil Nadu in India in 1983 when the Sri Lankan government launched heavy repression on Jaffna, the base of the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an organization fighting for Tamil autonomy and later, independence from Sri Lanka. Public opinion in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, whose people spoke the same language as the refugees, was strongly in favour of India doing something to help the Sri Lankan Tamils. Passions were further roused when Sri Lanka imposed a blockade on Jaffna, preventing daily necessities from reaching people. India sent supplies in fishing boats but the Sri Lankan Navy stopped them. This was followed by air-dropping of supplies by Indian transport planes, which carried Indian and foreign journalists as well. Sri Lanka realized it had gone too far and permitted supplies by boat. But the problem of Tamil insurgency was continuing, and the Sri Lankan government realized that no country other than India could help. President Jayewardene approached Rajiv, and the negotiations led to an accord in July 1987 by which the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka where Tamils were the majority would be merged into a single province, substantial devolution of power would take place, the LTTE would be dissolved and arms surrendered in a very short time, and the Indian army would come to the aid of the Sri Lankan government if requested by Sri Lanka. The accord failed to take off because the LTTE had given only reluctant consent, was not a signatory, did not trust the Sri Lankan government and refused to surrender. Jayewardene, in the meantime, asked for the Indian army to help implement the accord, and since it was the LTTE that was standing in the way, the army got involved in an increasingly messy fight with the Tamil guerrillas, who had an edge since they knew the terrain and had local support. The Indian army was in an unenviable position with Tamils resenting it because it was disarming the LTTE, and Sri Lankans resenting it for being a foreign army. The situation got even messier with Premadasa succeeding Jayewardene and asking the Indian government to withdraw its army. Rajiv agreed to a phased withdrawal, and the soldiers started to come home in mid-1989, but withdrew fully only after the 1989 elections. The Sri Lankan imbroglio was to cost Rajiv his life.

India played a major role in negotiating the Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea (Cambodia). It was reminiscent of Nehru's days when India was called upon to play the role of the honest broker in Southeast Asia, Korea, Congo, and so on. In January 1987, Vietnam let it be known to India that it wanted to withdraw from Kampuchea which it had occupied a few years

ago and that it wished India to work out the modalities in consultation with other countries. Natwar Singh, the Minister of State for External Affairs, did a lot of shuttle diplomacy in Southeast Asia, met the deposed Kampuchean ruler Prince Sihanouka a number of times in Paris, and arranged meetings between Sihanouka and Heng Samarian. As a settlement approached, the US and China got into the act and tried to sideline India. A twenty-one nation meeting was held in Paris, to which India was invited, and the settlement resulted in Vietnamese withdrawal, elections under UN auspices, and installation of a coalition government of Sihanouka and Heng Samarian.

Rajiv Gandhi gave a new life to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) by giving it a purpose: nuclear disarmament. He also tried to promote the idea of a G-15, a more compact version of G-77, which approximated more closely to the G-7. He placed India quite prominently on the world map, making her presence felt in a variety of fora on a number of issues. He travelled abroad on an average once a month during his five-year term, even inviting snipes from political opponents about his 'occasional visits to India'.

In keeping with his effort to build India's image in the community of nations, Rajiv was also committed to maintaining and enhancing Indian security. He gave the go-ahead to the modernization of the armed forces, which led to the doubling of the defence expenditure. The guided missile development programme, initiated by Mrs Gandhi in 1983, began to show results and two short-range missiles, Trishul and Prithvi, and one intermediate-range missile, Agni, in which Rajiv had taken great interest, were successfully tested. The Indian Navy was considerably expanded with the lease of a nuclear-powered submarine from the USSR and the purchase of a second aircraft carrier from Britain. The army got howitzer guns from Sweden and sanction for development of an all-Indian battle tank, the Arjun. In the last two years of Rajiv's tenure, defence spending was one-fifth of total government expenditure.

## **Bofors and Its Aftermath**

Ironically, it was these very same defence purchases that were to become the proverbial albatross around Rajiv's neck. The big one was Bofors, the stink of which continues to this day, but it started with smaller scandals around Fairfax and the HDW submarine deal. Very briefly, since details are available aplenty elsewhere, the Fairfax controversy centred on the appointment by V.P. Singh, Rajiv's finance minister, who had become notorious for his 'raid raj', of an American detective agency, Fairfax, to investigate the illegal stacking of foreign exchange in overseas banks by Indians. A forged letter which suggested that the investigations included Amitabh Bachchan, a close friend of the prime minister, surfaced from nowhere, and big industrialists, Nusli Wadia of Bombay Dyeing and Ambani of Reliance, were reported to be involved in the game on opposite sides. The transfer of V.P. Singh from Finance to Defence, which Rajiv claimed was because he needed somebody capable to handle Defence at the time because of the crisis with Pakistan, was projected by the Opposition as proof that Rajiv was trying to shield his friend Amitabh. This was followed by the HDW submarine scandal. When India wanted to place a further order for two more submarines with the HDW shipyard in West Germany from which it had bought four in 1981, and asked for some price discount, the shipyard declined saying it had to pay a heavy 7 per cent commission on the sale anyway. V.P. Singh, who was Defence Minister, without speaking to



Rajiv, ordered an enquiry. This was taken as an unfriendly act since Mrs Gandhi herself was Defence Minister at the time of the award of the contract in 1981, and a Congress government was in power. There was criticism of Singh's conduct in the cabinet meeting, and he soon resigned from the government. The Opposition and the Press declared this as proof of V.P. Singh's honesty and Rajiv's attempts at a cover-up. The Mr Clean label was shifted to Singh and Rajiv's honeymoon was over.

On 16 April 1987, a few days after Singh's resignation, the Bofors scandal broke. The allegations, which first appeared on Swedish Radio, were that the equivalent of Rs 60 crores was paid as bribes to Indian officials and Congress party members to secure the contract for the 410 howitzer guns to Bofors company of Sweden in the face of stiff competition from a French gun. The allegations, which were taken up in a big way by the Indian press, particularly the *Indian Express*, and later *The Hindu*, soon snowballed into a major attack on Rajiv himself with sections of the Opposition parties charging that he and his family were the recipients of the money. The situation was bad enough for Rajiv to make a public denial of his and his family's involvement. It also provided an opportunity to Giani Zail Singh, the President, to try and settle scores with Rajiv. Annoyed because Rajiv had been lax in observing the convention of regularly calling on the President to keep him informed of important developments, and also because he was not consulted about the Punjab and Mizo accords, and lured by the prospect of a second term, Zail Singh became the centre of a major conspiracy in mid-1987 to dismiss Rajiv from office. Opposition leaders and some Congress dissidents encouraged the President to dismiss Rajiv on charges of corruption or failing to fulfil the constitutional requirement of keeping the President informed. Zail Singh was almost persuaded but V.P. Singh, who was the alternative, declined to play the game and a major constitutional catastrophe was saved.

It is to Rajiv's great credit that, in the midst of scandals and conspiracies, he personally handled with great elan, from all accounts, the crisis arising out of one of the severest droughts of the twentieth century. The southwest monsoon failed in 1987 (June-September), affecting one-fourth of the population of the country, living in one-third of all districts located in eleven states. A massive effort was launched to move food and drinking water, and to start employment schemes, in affected areas. It was claimed by Rajiv with justifiable pride that not a single life was lost. This, in a country where millions died in a man-made famine as recently as in 1943, four years before independence.

But Bofors and the stink of corruption would not go away, and resurfaced in 1989, the election year. The Joint Parliamentary Committee Report had given a more or less clean chit, but the Comptroller and Auditor-General's Report cast doubts on the procedure for selection of guns and raised other issues as well. Though it said nothing of the kind, the Opposition insisted it was proof of Rajiv's guilt and demanded his resignation. They followed it up with *en masse* resignation from the Lok Sabha, which was no great sacrifice since elections were round the corner anyway, but was nonetheless an embarrassment for the government. And Rajiv went to his second general elections with the country in a mood very different from the one in his first round.

A little older and much wiser, Rajiv had much to look back upon with pride. Except for Sri Lanka, his handling of foreign affairs had met with considerable approval. India's standing in the

world had been enhanced, not declined, and relations with superpowers and neighbours were on an even keel, somewhat better, certainly no worse than before. The economy had done well, registering the highest rates of growth to date, though the deficit and debt was piling up. The security and defence policy had been a sound one with the overdue modernization of the armed forces set in motion. Computerization was given a big push, a necessity if India was to remain in the reckoning in the world system. Anti-poverty programmes in general and the literacy, drinking water, immunization, and Panchayati Raj initiatives in particular, had the poor, and the rural areas as their main focus, thus giving a lie to charges of elitism.

There were several weaknesses, no doubt. Among them was Rajiv's tendency to change his mind too often. He shuffled his cabinet once every two months on an average, for example. He was also given to flashes of temper, and sometimes spoke without having thought through the consequences, as in the famous incident when he dismissed the Foreign Secretary in a press conference. Charges of inaccessibility also began to be made, and some thought that he was also becoming arrogant, but these are the usual problems of high office. The biggest problem, in fact, was his relative lack of political experience, unfamiliarity with the nuances of grassroots mobilization, party organization, etc. But most observers were agreed that he was learning fast, and that he was no more the awkward leader, that he had begun to enjoy the rough and tumble of Indian politics. Also, by 1989 he had passed a crucial test of political leadership: of having the nerves for it. He withstood Bofors, in which the most vicious personal allegations were made about him, and he was ready to endure the gruelling election campaign for a second time. Whether he won or lost, he had decided beyond doubt that he was going to be a player in the great Indian game.