

Signs Of The Times



THERE was the baby-faced ex-pilot, all thumbs as he handled the controls in his political flight simulator; the rough-spun son of the soil, a man of diamond-hard loyalty to the ruling family, catapulted into a devalued presidency; the freckle-faced widow in rebellious flow, queen of the mimics and endowed with a hard nose; the superstar who almost became god as his life returned to him in a hospital bed; the sleek and deadly fighter planes that the nation and its neighbour coveted; the circuses in the states that ran rings around each other, the ring-masters marching to a distant drummer in Delhi; and a baby elephant that melted from flesh into myth into flowery effigy—these were the dominant images of the year, a year that was turgid and yet tempestuous.

In recollection, the year's lows outweighed its highs. The ruling party was infected by the contagious disease of dissidence. Originating in Maharashtra when Abdul Rehman Antulay was replaced in disgrace by Babasaheb Bhosale, it spread untamed and fast to almost every Congress(I) state, reaching a crescendo as the year ground to an end, and three states, two of them Indira Gandhi's citadels, went to the polls. Added to this cacophony was the anger and the prickliness of Punjab and Assam; regionalism and a growing intransigence among the Akalis and the Assam agitationists seemed to strike up an ominous orchestra for the Centre. Through it all, the nation's disparity grew in focus, and the whole seemed to be composed of parts bound by a centripetal force that was growing weaker.

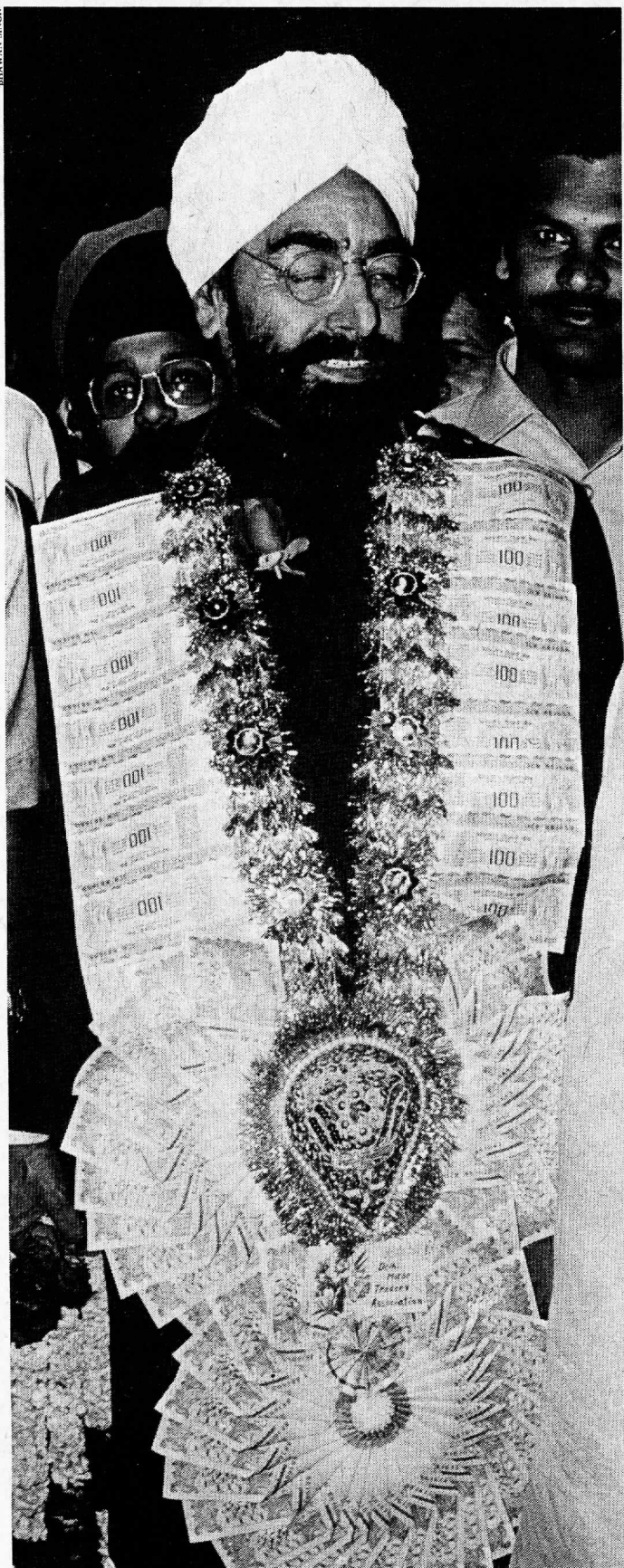
Then there were the highs: the brilliantly-orchestrated and supremely successful Asian Games held in Delhi's early winter chill, which represented India's finest hour. It was a spirit-lifting and emphatic example of what the country was capable of, a glimpse of the enormous potential that lay fallow below the surface. There was the India Festival in London, a razzle-dazzle live advertisement for the country. And there were the prime minister's trips abroad, showing her up at her best as she carried the flag into the White House and the Kremlin.

Base Spectacle: At other times the Government worked, electing to put up spectacles that rallied more support than its policies. The return of the forgotten 'Sanjay Brigade' was symbolised in its basest form by the Cecil B. DeMille-style political extravaganza in Bangalore. There, Rajiv Gandhi's anointment as Sanjay's spiritual heir took place amidst the militancy, sycophancy and bravado that had epitomised the ruling party's Emergency image.

The appointment of Antulay's successor in Maharashtra demonstrated the ruling party's endless capacity for flabby compromise. Bhosale was a Falstaff among knaves, and no less entertaining was the comedy in Andhra Pradesh, where Chenna Reddy was succeeded by Tangaturi Anjiah in October 1980, who was succeeded by Bhavanam Venkatram in February 1982, who was succeeded by Vijayabhaskara Reddy in September. The only tragic figure in this procession of laughs was Vishwanath Pratap Singh, whose police killed hundreds of innocent villagers after calling them dacoits but could not bag the bigger dacoits who killed Singh's brother and eventually forced his conscientious exit.

Events took a predictable turn in the political arena. Two





(Clockwise from extreme left) Maneka Gandhi waxing eloquent in Amethi; Rajiv makes the grade in Bangalore; Zail Singh noteworthy as President; and Bachchan back from the brink

years after storming back to power, Mrs Gandhi's Congress(1) brought the art of do-nothing to a lofty state. While the Government surveyed its wrinkles in a cracked mirror, Mrs Gandhi commissioned 'Operation Facelift', a cornucopia of cosmetic changes meant essentially to project a glowing image of action.

Musical Chairs: Flourishing a brand new 20-point programme, the prime minister went in for the seventh reshuffle of her Cabinet since 1980 in September. It was an action breathtaking in its purposelessness, involving seven of her 18 Cabinet colleagues and the induction of six new faces into an obese council of ministers. It was absurd political theatre, and the floorboards echoed with desperation and uncertainty.

More despair was being given birth to. Industry complained loudly about a recessionary squeeze while the Government said conditions had never been better. But a general credit squeeze generated gloom that was heightened when militant trade union guru Datta Samant spearheaded a historic strike of textile workers in Bombay that brought 60 mills to a standstill and turned that city's thriving industrial landscape into a bleak vista of cold chimneys and silent looms.

Militancy, in fact, seemed to be a catching disease. Pakistan got its first F-16s from the United States as part of a multi-billion dollar military aid package, while the Indian Government went shopping for the French Mirage 2000 and beefed up its Jaguar squadrons as the low-level fighter-bombers began to come off the Hindustan Aeronautics assembly-line in Bangalore.

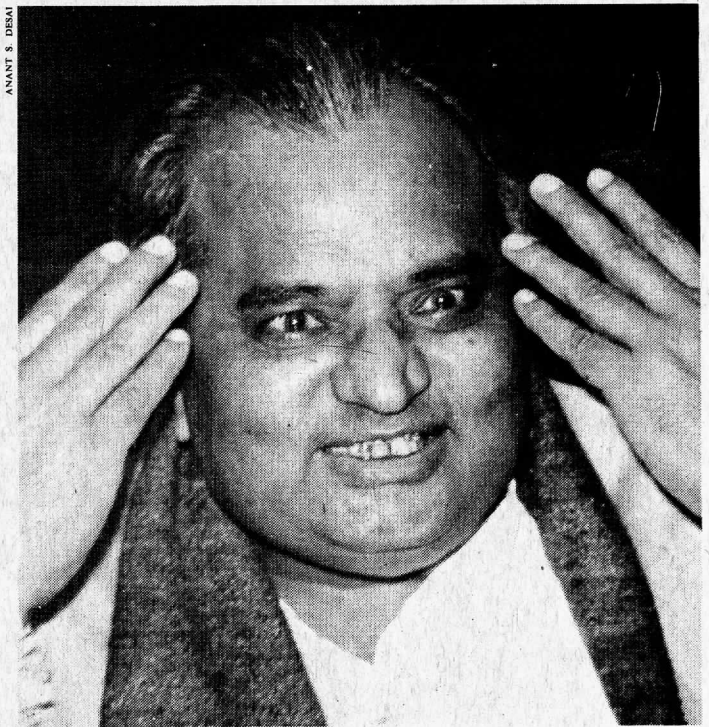
THERE was also the two nations' minuet to the strains of Pakistan's blossoming nuclear policy. India wanted a friendship treaty and Pakistan wanted a no-war pact. President Zia-ul-Haq's brief tete-a-tete with Mrs Gandhi in New Delhi in November helped hasten the thaw, and was followed by Pakistani Foreign Secretary Niaz Naik's visit in December. A joint commission was set up to work out modalities in a host of non-military matters, and peace was being talked about by both sides with more earnestness than ever before.

The spotlight also fell on where a chapter and a dynasty came to an end with the death of Palden Thondup Namgyal, the former chogyal of Sikkim. The tiny Himalayan kingdom swung back into news as thousands of mourners flocked to pay the departed leader an emotional farewell.

Fortunately for the nation's morale, some achievements punctuated the air of drift and despondency. In March, India joined a very select group when a top secret expedition successfully planted the tricolour on the forbidding wastes of Antarctica, thus establishing a permanent foothold on what could prove a promising piece of real estate in the near future. Shortly after, the nation's image received another boost when the Festival of India in London was inaugurated by Mrs Gandhi, and a glittering cast that included Prince Charles and Margaret Thatcher added its applause to a sudden upsurge in interest in Indian arts, craft, history and culture.

Family Feud: It proved a temporary reprieve. Mrs Gandhi returned from London to land straight in the arms of a messy family squabble that was splashed all over the front pages in graphic detail. The fracas ended with her rebellious daughter-in-law, Maneka Gandhi, storming out of the prime minister's house with son, luggage and dogs—but not out of Mrs Gandhi's political life.

Smarting from the treatment she had received, Maneka lashed out at the Gandhi family and washed exceedingly soiled linen in public. Her exile from 1 Safdarjung Road finally brought about her political debut, helped along by disgruntled Sanjay loyalists who hopped nimbly on to the newly-created bandwagon. By year's end the newest Mrs Gandhi was regularly barnstorming





(Clockwise from left) Sikkim's tearful farewell to its former leader, the chogyal; Bhosale in goggle-eyed wonder; Samant sternly stubborn; Maneka leaving home; Thatcher and Mrs Gandhi at the Festival of India

the Congress(I) citadels, carrying the battle into the enemy camp. While she was adept at imitating her mother-in-law's populist gestures, she was obviously discovering that being on the receiving end for a change was not an enjoyable experience, and that she was dealing more with political foes than inimical in-laws.

The mother-in-law, too, was not in a position to be sanguine. Assembly elections held in four states in June gave the ruling party's complacency a rude jolt, when it barely scraped through in three states and obtained a minority in the fourth. But Haryana was transformed into a market-place of legislative flesh as the Congress(I)'s Bhajan Lal and the Lok Dal's Devi Lal bought supporters like strumpets in a sleazy brothel.

Ethical Nadir: Bhajan Lal helped bring the electorate's image of a politician to its lowest ebb since Independence, making that avocation sound like a four-letter word. Legislators were herded together and kept under armed guard while the price of their souls and their loyalties was fixed. Defections had become the dominating element of the Congress(I)'s polity, and this was underlined in Gujarat in December, when a strong group of dissidents chose to walk out of the Congress(I) rather than wait for the chief minister to change.

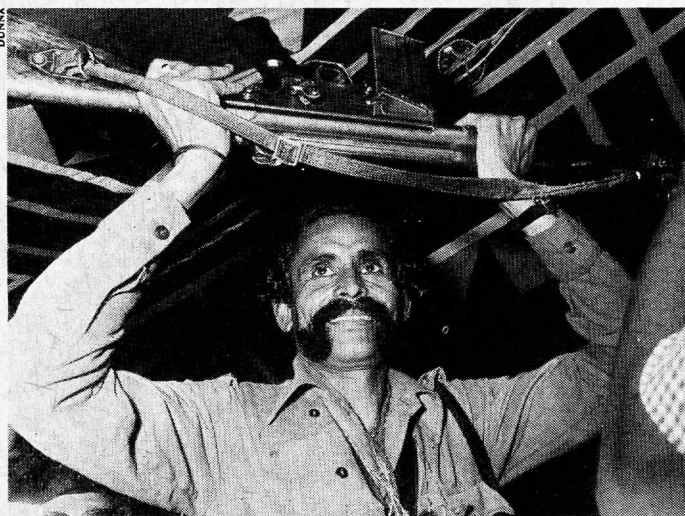
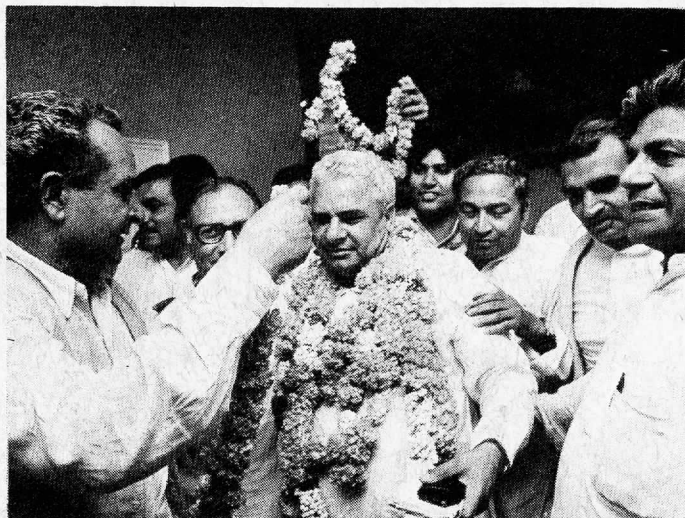
Corruption had become legal tender, and political integrity an archaeological commodity. Through all the battering, the only brightness came from the fact that prices had remained steady for more than a year. But the conditions attached to the Government's loan from the International Monetary Fund, and the difficulty of sticking to them with overdrawn state finances and widespread drought, generated considerable controversy. While the trade gap threatened to increase, the Government blithely liberalised imports and went in for a shopping spree, buying up steel plants and super-thermal stations while it transformed the country into a major buyer in world markets. Sensing the new mood, the multinationals came knocking on the nation's door, led by the Japanese juggernauts. The ill-starred Maruti project finally landed in Suzuki's lap, and other Japanese car manufacturers tied up contracts to set up joint ventures in a suddenly rejuvenated Indian automotive market.

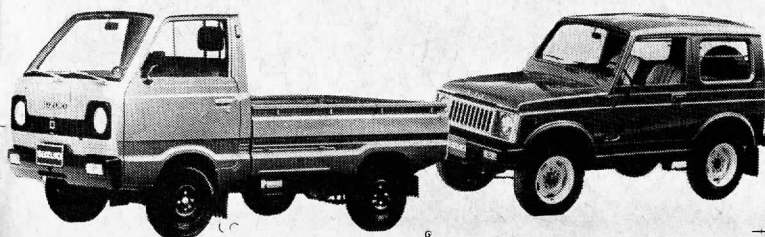
At the human level, there was a succession of bad news throughout the year, but easily the most distressing trend came with the sudden rash of bride-burning incidents in north India over dowry disputes. A TV set became more valuable than the life of a young woman, and a new blood sport was born. In fact, northern India's history was largely writ in blood as the dacoit menace loomed larger and the surrender of one, Malkhan Singh, was turned into an event more befitting the return of an exiled king than a bloodthirsty killer of men.

Smooth Succession: Meanwhile, with the overwhelming majority the ruling party enjoyed in Parliament and the state legislatures, Giani Zail Singh succeeded Neelam Sanjiva Reddy without undue fuss. The nomination was obviously a reward for Zail Singh's unabashed loyalty to his *rahnumas* (patrons) and also because his rivalry with Punjab Chief Minister Darbara Singh had introduced a thorny element into that state's simmering unrest.

The Sikh militants' raucous war cries were reinforced with a bristling thicket of spears and threats, and Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's emergence as the cheer leader in the Sikhs' religious chauvinism was made even more explosive when the Akali Dal, led by H.S. Longowal, declared war on the Government unless its demands were conceded. The Sikh militancy capped a growing alienation between different communities, and the year ended with another insoluble problem when the 20th round of talks between the Assam agitation leaders and the Government since June 1979 ended in bitter impasse.

It seemed in fact that India performed really well only when





(Clockwise from extreme left) Suzuki makes its bow; protesting against bride-burning; Malkhan's farewell to arms; Bhajan Lal in dubious victory; Mrs Gandhi charms America; Reddy's last hurrah and Bhindranwale holding court



Mrs Gandhi went abroad. In July, her *tour de force* of the United States charmed President Reagan and a vast slice of the American people. The prime minister enhanced her international image and effectively halted the slide in Indo-US relations.

WHILE Mrs Gandhi was bowling America over, another national figure was making headlines back home. Lanky superstar Amitabh Bachchan battled for his life for weeks after an accident during filming, and the entire nation seemed to will him to stay alive with prayers, posters, and lonely vigils outside the Bombay hospital where he lay. It was moving human drama, paling all of Bachchan's prodigious celluloid output, and suddenly, towards year-end, the fully recovered actor put on the make-up of a superhero who would add that magical crowd-pulling charisma of his to the beleaguered party of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.

In the end, the headlines were dominated by India's politicians. In Bihar, Chief Minister Jagannath Mishra clumsily tried to stem the increasing media exposures of his state's orgy of corruption and crime with a harsh Press Bill. The bill was met, however, by a nation-wide protest from the press, and the snowballing resistance led, by the end of the year, to a victory of sorts when the ball was tossed back into the Government's court for a final decision.

The Press Bill, however, was an overt admission of the desperate straits the Government found itself in, and Mrs Gandhi's public postures seemed more and more to portend a crackdown on dissent and democracy. Nature added its annual contribution when devastating floods racked Orissa and Bihar, and drought crippled Rajasthan, West Bengal, Bihar and Gujarat.

Final Flourish: In Kashmir, the lion let out his last roar with the controversial Resettlement Bill, and Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's death in September ended a significant chapter in Indian history. The Sheikh's funeral, and the outpouring of genuine grief that followed in Kashmir, showed how he had straddled the state like a colossus. But before breathing his last, with a superb sense of timing, the Sheikh had orchestrated the appointment of his son Farooq as his successor. Soon after his father's death, Farooq



(Clockwise from left) Farooq and Kashmir bid goodbye to the Sheikh; Jagannath Mishra hangs tough: Orissa flood victims grab food packets





surprised critics who thought he would be a weak replacement by sacking undesirable elements from his Cabinet and taking a firm stand on the Resettlement Bill.

At the opposite end of the country, another improbable leader was rising. In Andhra Pradesh, matinee idol N.T. Rama Rao decided to cash in on his cinematic do-gooder image and plunged headlong into politics with his Telugu Desam party. Drawing huge crowds wherever he went, his strategy consisting of theatre more than anything else, he posed a major threat to the Congress(I) in one of its strongest states, threatening to follow in Tamil Nadu's actor-turned-Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran's footsteps.

But the man of the moment was clearly the grand old man of Indian industry, J.R.D. Tata. India's first civil aviator proved that at 78, the 'spirit of adventure that had pervaded his eventful life was still very much alive. Strapped into a tiny, single-engined Leopard Moth, similar to the one he flew to pioneer Indian aviation 50 years ago, JRD retraced his original route from Bombay to Karachi and back, putting in almost 14 hours in the air, and got a hero's welcome at the Juhu airstrip.

Bidding Farewell: In Moscow, however, it was a hero's farewell as President Leonid Brezhnev, the chief architect of Indo-Soviet amity, passed into history. All over India, people were given cause to remember another hero, a man whose values had almost faded into oblivion. The making of the *Gandhi* film and the controversy it was accompanied by was succeeded by a world-wide wave of glowing tributes to the three-hour-long product and the man it portrayed.

While the people were about to rediscover one helmsman through a film, another died in Beijing, and the fumbling Opposition lost another towering figure in Promode Dasgupta, secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Happily, India notched up a creditable tally of medals in the Asian Games. But reality returned when Mrs Gandhi decided to go in for snap polls in three states. Close to the end of her third year in power, the polls will serve as a litmus test of all that has gone wrong—and right—in the year past. Mrs Gandhi's campaign speeches were full of angry outbursts against her opponents, and rhetoric and invective seemed to overshadow policies and performance. It was not a cheerful start for the new year, and promised tumult and confusion in 1983.

—DILIP BOBB and CHAITANYA KALBAG



Mrs Gandhi bids farewell to Zia-ul-Haq and family (top left); Ben Kingsley as Gandhi; and the spectacular opening ceremony of the Asiad