

INDIA: Return To Normalcy

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's dramatic announcement on January 18 that the Emergency in India is being relaxed and that elections to the Lok Sabha will be held in March, has created ripples of amazement the world over. All detained Opposition leaders have been released, and press censorship has been lifted. What do these developments portend?

Things couldn't have looked bleaker for the Opposition parties in India on November 5, 1976, when the Lok Sabha's life was extended by another year. The General Elections, if they ever came, could only be held after March 18, 1978. It seemed as though Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's strong dose of discipline for an errant democracy had not completely banished the malaise.

Soon afterward, Defense Minister Bansi Lal categorically stated that the Emergency would continue for quite some time more. A large number of Opposition leaders who had been detained after the government's clampdown on June 26, 1975, had been released from gaol. After decades of inter-party squabbles, the

nation's Opposition factions finally began to discuss the possibility of putting up a united front — in effect, merging the major parties — and an electoral contest between the ruling Congress party and a unified Opposition seemed more practical.

And so 1976 ended on a note of uncertainty. There were plenty of straws in the wind, however. The Western, and particularly the American press, had once again stepped up criticism of the Indira government. Ranan Lurie's caricatures of the Prime Minister in *Newsweek*, and *Time's* coverage of the "harassment" of press barons Goenka and Irani, inexplicably reached Indian newsstands. Eighteen months back, such criticism would never have been tolerated. The intelligent observers pricked up their ears. Was a momentous change in attitudes in the offing?

The 'intellectuals' tended to disagree. A week into the new year, they could see no silver lining at all. "Totalitarian" or "authoritarian" rule, they argued, was so addictive, that Mrs. Gandhi could never give up the tremendous advantages in power that she had amassed. Meanwhile, the Indians For Democracy in Philadelphia continued to make waves of dissent, and soapbox orators in Hyde Park proclaimed the final interment of democracy in India. "Mrs. Gandhi has got everything in her grip now", they chorused. "Why will she ever give it up?" The questions piled up; it seemed as though the future of the world's largest "floundering democracy" were ringed by a gigantic interrogation-mark.

But again, there were dozens of subtle signals being hoisted all over India. Political prisoners were released in a steady stream. The Opposition parties decided to meet in New Delhi on January 22 to discuss a merger of the four largest factions — the Bharatiya Lok Dal, the Congress (O), the Socialist Party, and the Swantantra Party. Before that, of course, there was the exchange of letters between Mrs. Gandhi and Mr. Asoka Mehta, the recently released Congress (O) leader, which had generated a lot

of hope of a dialogue between the government and the opposition.

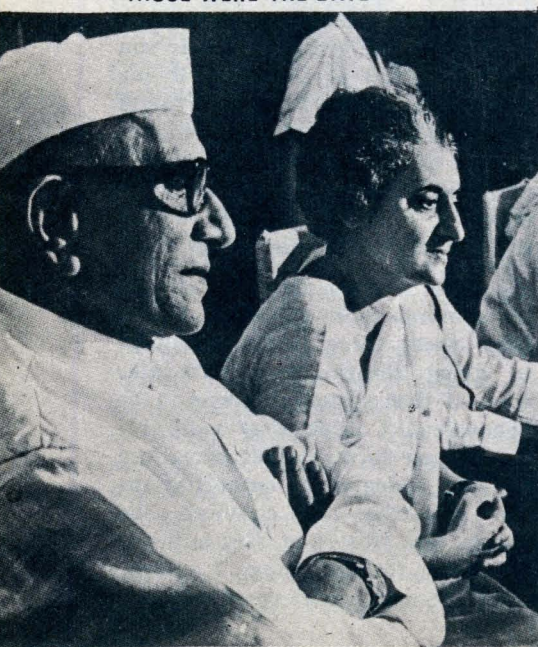
At the same time, press censorship had been increasingly relaxed, and where formerly there was no coverage of the Opposition's activities at all, small reports on their doings began creeping into newspaper columns. Then, on January 16, Kuldip Nayar wrote in the *Indian Express* that "elections to the Lok Sabha may well be held towards the end of March or the beginning of April The emergency may be relaxed but not 'lifted.'" Suddenly, political antennae began to vibrate strongly all over the country, and the nation waited with bated breath.

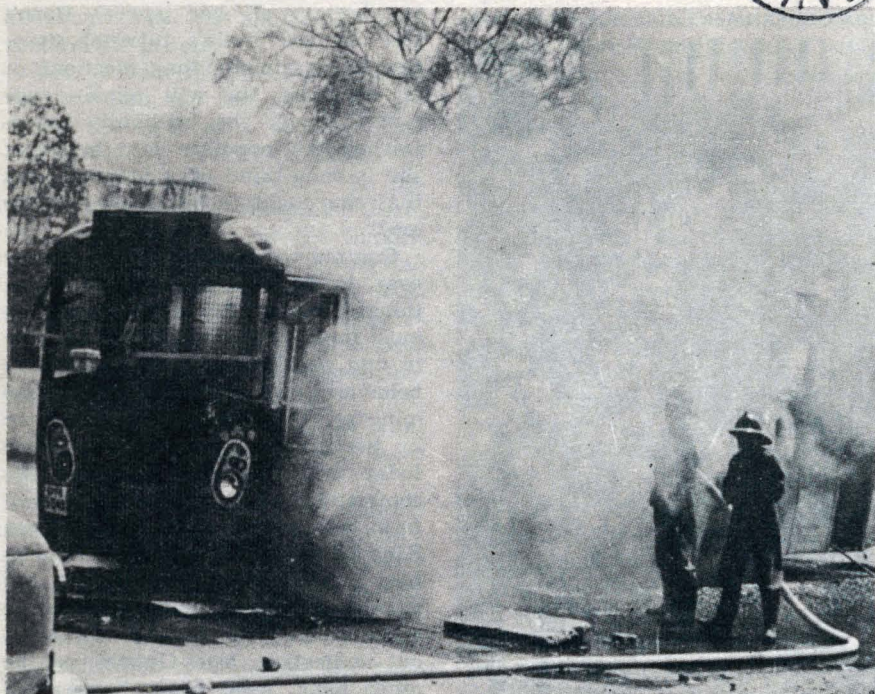
On January 19, the morning papers carried jubilant headlines: "LOK SABHA POLL IN MARCH", "ELECTIONS IN MARCH", "PRIME MINISTER ANNOUNCES FURTHER RELAXATION OF EMERGENCY". What caught people by surprise was not the announcement itself, but its timing. The previous day, the only Opposition leaders still in prison, Morarji Desai of the Congress (O)

MRS. GANDHI PAYING HOMAGE TO MAHATMA GANDHI



MORARJI DESAI WITH MRS. GANDHI—THOSE WERE THE DAYS





BUS BURNING AFTER GUJARAT RIOT, 1974

and L. K. Advani of the Jana Sangh, had been released from detention. "That woman", Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had done it again, delivered another coup de grace.

A few hours after his release, Morarji Desai said that the nation could not be strong without freedom from fear. "Individuals will come and go," he went on, "but the nation has to be strong and fearless." In a rising chorus of approbation, Opposition leaders hailed Mrs. Gandhi's announcement that the President had agreed to the dissolution of Parliament, and to the holding of elections toward mid-March, over twelve months ahead of schedule. Kuldip Nayar had been proved to be phenomenally accurate in his prediction. The soapbox intellectuals lost their audiences.

The immediate, and overwhelming, reaction was one of admiration for Mrs. Gandhi. That she had voluntarily tossed the electoral ball into the Opposition court was astonishing in its implications. That she had voluntarily given up the immense power that she had come to wield since the Emergency was promulgated, was beyond comprehension to those prophets of doom who had rung in the new on December 31 with long faces. Mrs. Gandhi had succeeded in attaining a position where she could get away

with anything. She had succeeded in stifling every whiff of opposition. Slowly, the world had begun drifting toward an acceptance of her paramountcy. Why then had she calmly opened the doors of the lions' cages?

Indira Gandhi is an extremely astute politician. Time and again, her moves have caught everyone off-guard. Probably, she did not want to go down in history in the same boat as Idi Amin and Colonel Gaddafi — despotic "statesmen" who had sold the souls of their nations to the devil. There was, in every action of hers, an unmistakable affection for the land of her birth, and a desire to propel it on its way to happiness and plenty. She told the nation of her decision regarding the elections in an unscheduled radio speech broadcast on the evening of January 18, and reiterated her "unshakable faith in the power of the people." In her letter to Asoka Mehta, she had said her party and government had always been committed to parliamentary democracy, "in which I believe as an ideal as well as a practical necessity." In one masterful stroke, Indira Gandhi had put the finishing touch to the huge canvas of her governance of the Indian people.

What is indubitable is the fact that Mrs. Gandhi has now assured herself a place in the world's gallery of greats. There was a new roseateness in the January air after her gesture, that had not been there before. Everyone was electrified. Cafes and cocktail hostesses buzzed with conjecture. "After leading the nation on the road to a good future," said a Bombayite, "Mrs. Gandhi has brought the country back from the brink of totalitarianism."

Truly had the Prime Minister stooped to conquer. There was nary the slightest opposition to her continuance in office. Distinguished foreign personalities from Michael Foot and Margaret Thatcher to William Saxbe and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had commended her strength of purpose.

The Armed Forces were unequivocal in their support for her policies. There was nothing in fact that stood between Mrs. Gandhi and absolute, intoxicating power. And yet she had relinquished her temptations.

The skeptics will not stop being skeptical, however. "Mrs. Gandhi is a clever woman," they will say. "This move of hers is calculated. Do you seriously think she is about

A BIG 'YES' TO THE ELECTIONS





to give up all her power? Hasn't she changed India's internal situation so drastically that, elections or no elections, she will remain supreme? Hasn't she brilliantly brainwashed the populace into believing she is some kind of a Messiah, and that she ought to be forever at the top?"

One must remember that it is very easy to be convinced of all these things. But at the same time, one must hark back into history, and try to find parallels with Mrs. Gandhi's behavior. Has any president, prime minister, king, queen, or statesman in the kind of position she holds today, with the kind of power she commands today, ever climbed down from autocracy's lofty rungs? Even King Edward VIII, one must remember, gave up his throne for the woman he loved, only because he could never hope to gain her without abdicating. Mrs. Gandhi, on the other hand, need never have made any concessions. Everything was moving her way, and everything was hers for the asking. The Western press, a big thorn in Mrs. Gandhi's side, had gradually shifted from a stand of unrelenting hostility to a position of grudging admiration. It must have been herculean for her, then, to have done what she did on January 18.

We now come to the possibility of Mrs. Gandhi having had intimations of mortality. If, as logic dictated, she continued to rule the nation with an iron fist, would not this system of authoritarianism be perpetuated? On the other hand, would she ever find a suitable successor who could perpetuate the system? She could easily have been a dictator; but she did not want to be one. She did not want India, after her passing, to be tossed into the throes of a situation not unlike that in Uganda, or Libya. She did not want her nation's 600 million people to follow, like meek sheep, a single shepherd all the while. To top it all, the nation's morale has definitely touched an all-time high. Even the **Indian Express**, one of Mrs. Gandhi's arch-foes, said in its January 20 editorial: "It is to the credit of the Prime Minister that she has realized that a vast country like India . . . cannot be ruled by a compulsive regime, and that sooner or later democratic processes must be allowed free play so that the Government derives its strength and its

sanction from the continuous consent of the people."

Mrs. Gandhi may be gambling on the fact that she and her party are riding the crest of a wave of optimism. She is clearly confident of gaining a massive victory in the polls. The present situation, therefore, is an acid test for the Opposition. And the Opposition is reacting suitably with frenetic activity tinged with a "now or never" desperation. But if there is continued dissent amidst the ranks of the Opposition, Mrs. Gandhi will be able to turn to the world and ask it to see what she meant when she clamped down the Emergency.

Whether the January 18 concessions amount to a return to normalcy is the moot point. The Emergency has not been totally lifted, it has only been relaxed. Press censorship, too, has been relaxed, but the Prevention of Publication of Objectionable Matter Act, which was passed by Parliament a year back, as well as a code of conduct that the Government would like journalists to follow, will prove to be sufficient deterrents to unbridled expression. What has been immediately evid-

ent is the fact that the Opposition leaders, at first hesitantly and then increasingly boldly, have been demanding a total removal of the Emergency, and other concessions. Such political coverage has brought back memories of the pre-June 1975 days, when the dailies used to be full of allegations and counter-allegations, rhetoric and more rhetoric, and demands that were rarely met. One hopes Mrs. Gandhi's magnanimity will not result in a return to the Tower of Babel days.

The Western press, on its part, has been caught completely by surprise by the Prime Minister's move. **The Washington Post** banner-headlined the story, and **The New York Times** front-paged it. Both newspapers have, in the past, been guilty of unabashed and vitriolic criticism of the "Indira regime". Without doubt, the American press will, in the next two months, be watching developments in India with close and keen interest. In the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's considerably reduced antipathy toward the Western press's comments, one hopes there will be a new atmosphere of understanding in Western spheres. But given the

Western press's capacity to read between lines and to read dire meanings into innocuous events, the scoffing will not be reduced for quite some time.

A few Opposition leaders have expressed dissatisfaction with the short period of time left before the elections, in which to recoup their forces, and put up a good fight. In the light of the elaborate politicking that used to precede elections in the past, the time that is now available does seem rather short, although Sarvodaya leader Jayaprakash Narayan has deplored the fact that "the opposition parties have wasted so much time over this essential step (of uniting) that should have been taken at least a year ago." The urgency might very well render this shot in the Opposition's arm a kick in its backside. In reality, propelling it into finding rapid-fire solutions to its own maladies. Everything, however, points to an exciting tussle in the weeks ahead. Whatever the outcome, the grandeur of Indira Gandhi's maneuver will not fade for a long time to come.

CHAITANYA KALBAG

ADDRESSING HER PEOPLE





ASOKA MEHTA

THE PRIME MINISTER



JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN



RAJ NARAIN—ANOTHER ARCH-FOE

A. B. VAJPAYEE OF THE JANA SANGH

