

THE JANATA PARTY

Will It, Won't It, Will It, Won't It Split?

Point

The Janata Party will soon split. The Janata Party has always been a loose coalition. The Janata Party's constituents have viewpoints and ambitions that differ too widely. The Janata Party was a short-lived experiment in democracy.

Opinions like these began to rotate slowly in the air when hardly a few months had passed after the Janata victory in March 1977. As time went on, they began to circulate more and more speedily. Today, as the Congress parties are, paradoxically, mulling over the possibility of reunification, the Janata Party teeters on the edge of breakup.

Will the Janata Party split? Maybe not, if you take 'split' to mean a vertical sundering down the center. Most people feel that a splinter group will break away from the parent organization. The result may be an overall weakening of the party. But the edifice might still stand.

This splinter group, if it does break away eventually, would comprise such party leaders as Morarji Desai, Chandra Shekhar, Hemavati Nandan Bahuguna, Jagjivan Ram, Mohan Dharia, and H.M. Patel: members either of the erstwhile Congress(O), or of the Congress For Democracy (CFD) or ex-Congressmen (like Shekhar and Dharia) who were expelled from the pre-Emergency Congress led by Indira Gandhi.

Some people see the possible split as a move by the Janata Party to rid itself of its 'undersirables' and of its weaker components. This gains added significance if one sees the fact that two prominent leaders of the opposing side—Charan Singh and his Sancho Panza Raj Narain, both of the erstwhile Bharatiya Lok Dal—have also been lumped together with the 'undesirables'. The Quixote-ish Home Minister has on more than one occasion embarrassed the ruling party by his antics, chief among them being his consuming animosity toward Indira Gandhi and his clumsy attempts to have her clapped in prison.

Why should the Janata Party split? The answer to that is that the ruling party has realized that it can no longer fool all the people all the time by parroting pro-

fessions of unity. Unity has become a maddening mirage, essential but yet distant. Secondly, and more importantly, underlying this subtle propulsion toward a split is the ambition of the Jana Sangh-Bharatiya Lok Dal-Socialist combine of eventually taking over the reins of the government.

How would one explain the pressures on Singh and Narain then, both BLD men? It is evident that Singh would be the fittest candidate for the Prime Ministership if the 'splinter group' breaks away. And that would militate against the Jana Sangh's desire to rule the roost. For there is no doubt that today the Jana Sangh commands the largest following within the ruling party, and Charan Singh in the driver's seat would not do at all.

How has this problem been overcome? By an ingenious program put forth recently by Janata General Secretary

Nanaji Deshmukh: the Nanaji Plan, which calls for the retirement of *all* leaders over age sixty and their rechannelization into 'constructive and developmental work for the Party'. Deshmukh, one must note, is from the erstwhile Jana Sangh.

The 'over-sixty' clause, if it were ever accepted, would mean that the Jana Sangh's killed two birds with one stone: they would get rid of the Congress(O)-CFD-ex-Congress faction, *and* at the same time take care of Charan Singh. And if Singh were to resign, his Sancho Panza would not be far behind. And who wouldn't welcome Raj Narain's exit from the scene?

If all the over-sixties, prominent among whom are the Big Three of the party—Morarji Desai, Jagjivan Ram and Charan Singh—quit the scene, if not willingly then under duress, then it would only be a matter of time before their followers,

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in protest, threatened to follow suit. It stands to reason that the Jana Sangh-Socialist faction cannot allow itself the mistake of letting its BLD support drop away. So we may expect strenuous canvassing for BLD support and BLD participation in the new set-up (assuming that that process has not already begun).

What would happen if this scenario were played out to its completion? The obvious choice is leader of the Jana Sangh-Socialist-BLD faction would be Atal Behari Vajpayee, the ex-Jana Sanghi who has turned in an impressive performance as India's first non-Congress Foreign Minister. Close on his heels on the rungs of power would follow Socialist George Fernandes, who, as Industries Minister, has impressed people in spite of his hot-headed speeches. And the other notables in the faction—Lal Krishna Advani, Madhu Limaye, Madhu Dandavate, and Biju Patnaik—would pick up other key posts.

Talk of the Jana Sangh's plans to 'take over' the government one day is not mere conjecture—any intelligent observer of the political scene in India will second it. Although the Jana Sangh is maintained a low profile during the early months of the government's first year in power, they have gradually become more vocal. There has always been a feeling of suppressed strength in their statements. And when Vajpayee in March threatened to quit unless the Janata put its house in order within three months, things began to crystallize. Deshmukh's program has added fuel to the fire of speculation now.

In the event of a split, what would happen to the 'splinter group' spoken of earlier? It might decide to maintain a separate identity in Parliament and outside, or it might try for a merger with the Congress Party. In case separate identity is decided upon, the group might even decide to continue in the government in 'coalition' with the Jana Sangh-led group. Because, merger with the Congress would only mean the creation of three national parties, and that would not be a pleasant development for the Indira Congress. That is why, perhaps, the Congress(I) is today stepping up its attempts to get the Congress to agree to a merger.

Counterpoint

It seems appropriate in the light of recent trends in Indian politics to sit back and speculate on what the future holds. The present is too mixed-up, a devilish crossword-puzzle that eludes solution. Lines of loyalty swirl and eddy

in mystifying circles. Today's Peter turns out to be tomorrow's Judas. There is so much talk about integrity, and at the same time so much speculation as to whether this party or that party can hold together, that nobody is paying any attention to the question of whether, at this rate, the nation can hold together. 'Divided we stand' seems to be the new national motto, while 'Truth always triumphs', the old one, has been swept under the carpet by hasty brooms.

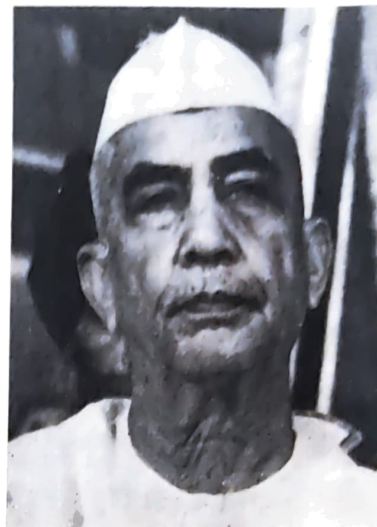
But the class of irrepressible optimists refuses to knuckle under this barrage of innuendo. The Janata Party *will not* split, say these die-hards. And to back up their contention, they thump down one paramount argument: Survival. 'Survival is the mother of all compromises', they insist. In many ways they seem to be right, too.



Vajpayee: the man who may be the next Prime Minister

First of all, before we discuss survival, we must accept the fact that the Indian politician is *not* motivated by noble ideals such as service to his country, the leading of his people toward a socialist utopia, or the placement of his brethren before himself. He is, first and last, an opportunist. For him politics is as much an avocation as his politicking is a mission—a purely bread-and-butter affair (usually larded over by a generous coating of jam) fed by the accompanying public exposure.

If we accept this definition, survival then emerges as the priority *numero uno* in the politician's eyes. (Of course, applying the law of averages, we do know that there are exceptions to every rule). And the Janata Party, merely so that it can survive, may, wonder of wonders, yet



Charan Singh: fated to be one of the two birds?

solve all its problems and emerge steel-tough, ramrod-straight, unified, dignified, edified its rubbery spine finally ossified, from its trial by fire. Indira Gandhi looming large on the horizon, the inherent foolishness in giving up one's seat of power willingly, and the paramountcy of survival may all combine to achieve the impossible.

If this hopeful scenario were accepted, we would have the Nanaji Plan graciously accepted by the 'over-sixties', and their unselfish retirement. A new set of younger leaders, perhaps led by Vajpayee and Fernandes, would then take over at the top. The elders would hover in the wings, offering advice, criticism, and the wisdom that comes with long years in the political whirl. From time to time there would be self-examination, self-criticism. No one would air his personal grievances in public, and the press would be unable to speculate. Differences would be kept under wraps and solved not around a dinner table but at lively closed-door debates. A new air of *bonhomie* would prevail, offenses (if relatively minor) forgiven and (yes) even forgotten. Jayaprakash Narayan would be strengthened by this influx of new Mahatmas.

And on the other side, the two Congresses would probably unite, too, with Madame Gandhi agreeing to give way in party leadership to a younger candidate. There, too, the older Congressmen would function as a watchful advisory body, helping create a strong, exemplary Opposition. India would, in short, be the world's most popular democracy, the most populous piece of heaven on earth.

Which scenario would you choose as your personal vision of India?

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