

Capital View

# Congress at the Crossroads

Bornesh Thapar

EVEN as U S scientists announce that they are about to utilise 'harmless bugs' to generate electric power, our Capital is Hooded with that other species of bug — the politician. The 'guest houses' of the State Governments are at the moment packed with triumphant, demoralised and broken politicians who are busy trying to find themselves a comfortable 'place in the sun'. The division of election spoils always provides an amusing spectacle, particularly when a heap of ministers and faction leaders have lost their mandate, but this time the question is being repeatedly asked whether the Congress High Command is going to order a spring cleaning or not.

The Prime Minister has always stressed that, a problem takes on a different aspect depending on your position in relation to it. Let us then look at the problem through the Prime Minister's eyes. Without a doubt, the Congress Party has emerged from the, election ordeal somewhat shaken. Urgent steps are needed to restore its morale, to give it the strength to meet the crystallising challenge of the Right, a challenge that many were apt to dismiss with contempt until a few weeks ago. True, it can be argued that the 'crystalisation' merely represents a coming-together of Rightists who existed before within the Congress and outside it, that there has been no marked shift in the thinking of the country. But can the amorphous Congress afford to blunder along as in the past or must its ideology be sharpened to isolate the 'men of local influence' who are flocking to the Swatantra and the Jan Sangh?

The discussions at Teen Murti Marg where the residence of the Prime Minister is located, are largely concentrated on salvaging the Congress position in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan threatened by rightwing combinations. The situation in Kerala, too, is causing worry with the Communists eating into the support of the ruling alliance. In other States like Mysore, the Punjab and Bihar the

problem is different; it is one of resolving the tensions between Congress factions. Only in Assam, Bengal, Andhra, Madras, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa is the position secure.

### Independents : A Problem

Before the business of salvaging can begin the Congress High Command will have to focus attention on the composition of the so-called 'Independents' who have found their way into the Vidhan Sabhas of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. With attempts already being made to forge Jan Sangh-Swatantra alliances in both States, there is danger that the (independents may be persuaded to join these alliances and reduce the Congress Party to a minority. In fact the Independents in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are conscious of their new-found strength and are likely to strike hard bargains. Sukhadia's talk about aligning with 'progressives' can mean anything.

Then there are the faction fights within the Congress Party at State level. Although Sukhadia's leadership in Rajasthan is still unquestioned, the same cannot be said for Katju in Madhya Pradesh, Jatti in Mysore, Kairon in the Punjab and Jha in Bihar. Katju and Jatti are in very serious trouble. The defeat of Katju in the election, it is clear, is the result of the work of the faction headed by Deshlehra who seems to be wedded to the idea that he can be Chief Minister, although Mandloi looks like the compromise solution. In Mysore, Jatti heads a legislature party loyal to Nijilingappa, who was defeated in his constituency, and will probably have to look elsewhere for a position.

Faction fights apart, the anti-Communist alliance in Kerala seems to be entering a period of disintegration. The Communist Party has grown more powerful in the Malabar area and could, if it so desired, make governing for the ruling alliance impossible. Indeed, it is becoming apparent to the Congress High Command that the election

scores being published in the national press do not provide an accurate picture of the CPI's strength. In Andhra, some 23 Independents are likely to sit with the sizeable Communist block which will lead the Opposition. In Parliament too, the CPI will command a membership of at least 35 — making it the leading Opposition Party at the Central level.

The Communist Party has still to elect a new leadership, but judging from the reports available there is a major section which is "not averse to discussing the possibility of a united front with the Congress now that the Right is supposed to be 'showing its teeth'. Namhoodiripad has offered the Congress and PSP an alliance in Kerala, and the party's organ, *New Age*, has begun to talk of united fronts. Any move of this sort, however can succeed only if the Prime Minister decides to adopt more radical positions. At the moment, everyone is guessing which way he will swing. The handling of the situation in the not-so-secure States will offer pointers.

Cabinet-making at the Centre will have to wait until the tangles at State level are cleared up. It seems almost certain that the Cabinet will be expanded and the Ministries reorganised. Finance holds the spotlight for various reasons, not the least being the reappearance of T T Krishnamachari on the political stage; the speculation is that the ministry will divide into three — Economic Affairs (including Planning), Revenue and Expenditure. Commerce and Industry, similarly, will divide into two, with Industry taking over Steel as well as the ordnance factories from the Defence Ministry. Mines and Fuel will separate from Steel. And the rumour persists that the Prime Minister will give up Foreign Affairs to concentrate on domestic problems. But the question is: Who will dominate in the Cabinet, the 'leftists' or the 'rightists'?

Judging from the trends that are developing within the Congress

ty it appears that at present the linant opinion is that 'rightism' t be fought by 'leftism', that elections have shown that this ie only effective way to deal with new challenges, that whenever fight was not ideological, the it was able to mobilise the dis-ent of the people. But this l of swing leftward is not likely comeovernight; gradualism will k the shift. The theorising goes what like this: The more the gress Party loses its own right to the Swatantra .and Jan gh. the more powerful will the e of the leftists become within Congress Party.

he Prime Minister is maintain- a rigid silence. Obviously, he not yet made up his mind as to t needs to be done. The con- nise arrangements in the States re Congress power has been en cannot be described as poin- ; they are merely tentative and ated largely by the "need to dyse the faction-fights. If any r ideas emerge in the course of discussions on the future Con- s policy, then these will of se, influence the arrangements he States — even as the bal- of power between right and in the Congress Party in every will have an impact of these same discussions.

Icanwhile. a large number of gress leaders are seriously per- ed over the condition of the fd the lack of logical clarity so manifest dur- the election. A demand is be- voiced that a number of ex- encred leaders give up ministe- position to concentrate on this h-neglected work! The Prime isiter, too. feels that the party misation must absorb the atten- of leading elements. He is of se, handicapped by the fact many of those who are good misers are not necessarily reli- Congressmen; indeed so many hem are closer to the Swatantra the Congress And younger lents have been denied oppor- tics to grow and mature by a very elements which are today e to build the defences nst the Right. These cadres at be created at short notice.

ithont a doubt, the Congress ir is once again at the cross-

roads. Its future will largely de- pend on the decisions it takes dur- ing the next few weeks.

*Without Comment*

\* Maharani Gayatri Devi, speaking from her palace in Jaipur, after her election, declared : The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. The luxury, in which Ministers and high officials live, is in direct con- trast with the misery of poor workers'!

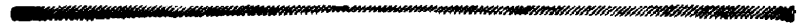
\* Congress President Sanjiva Reddy attributed the victory o( V K Krishna Menon over J B Kripalani to the basic strength of the Con-

gress organisation!

\* Morarji Desai, speaking in Ah- medabad, after the elections, said that the Congress must put in dedb cated work to establish a socialist pattern of society!

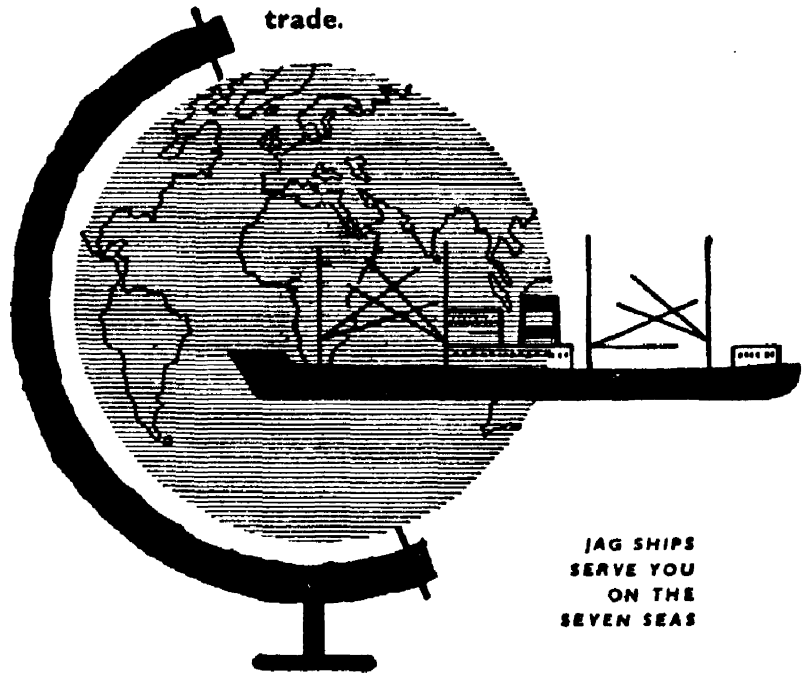
\* Pratap Singh Kairon, on being unanimously elected leader of the Punjab" Congress Party announced that the new Cabinet would be run on the basis of joint responsibility!

\* US Satellite Scientists report that the Earth is ceasing to be round and is getting a 'middle-age spread<sup>1</sup>, flattened at the poles and a bit paunchy around the midsec- tion!



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