

Historic popular mandate

IRONICALLY, IT'S AT the end of a year of unprecedented shocks to the body politic and to the morale of the people, triggering worldwide speculation about the ability of Indians to hold together and come through the crisis, that the most powerful, the most sweeping and one-sided, the most stunning mandate for one Centre and one party in the nation's history has been won. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's triumph is unique in character, scale and quality, the kind of parliamentary electoral outcome that goes beyond anything that his mother or even his grandfather was able to turn out for the Congress party and that is not going to be repeated for a while given the rules of the Indian political game. If these figures had turned up in a political novel, they would have invited perhaps critical taunts at the author's inclination for the fanciful if not for melodrama. The character of the Congress (I)'s victory in the Eighth General Elections is such as to bring the elected national political system very close to a one-party model. And the scale of the triumph is quite unprecedented in respect of the proportion of votes polled nationally by the winning party and, always disproportionate to this, the number of seats bagged. It used to be a standard observation after each of the seven general elections that the winning party was brought to power on a minority of the national vote; that routine has been upset by the latest numbers. And given the difficult-to-predict way in which votes translate themselves into seats for the winners and losers, the new figure of speech to denote a ruling party position beyond challenge in the Lok Sabha will be not two-thirds, or even three-fourths—but a four-fifths majority. The electric quality of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's political success can simply be expressed in terms of how the Opposition stands in the new Lok Sabha. For virtually all the national parties opposing the Congress (I), it has been a hard struggle towards the elementary dignity of a double digit Lok Sabha existence. The unambiguous defeat of many prominent Opposition leaders, notably the presidents of the BJP and the Janata, must intensify the feeling of decimation and demoralisation in their camp. As a State, Andhra Pradesh constitutes about the only exception to the all-India trends that show a marked preference in favour of the Congress (I) compared with the position preceding this general election. The success of the Telugu Desam leader, Mr. N. T. Rama Rao, the Chief Minister, in creating a popular wave of his own to keep the Rajiv (or Indira?) wave out of the largest of the southern States does stand out as a major political event. In West Bengal, the Left Front headed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has held its own, but not without suffering a severe erosion in its political position in the State, and especially in the urban areas. In Kashmir, the out-of-power National Conference led by Dr. Farooq Abdullah has done well, which means the minority group led by Mr. G. M. Shah, the Chief Minister, could be in trouble. But these results upvalue Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's remarkable political achievement rather than take away anything significant from it. It's a truly historic popular mandate won across-the-board, in every zone and social cross-section in a vast country that provides the world's largest electoral experience.

The 1984 verdict is dramatic confirmation of the finding of political researchers that the Indian voter is learning to exercise his or her choice in an increasingly direct, evolved and clear-cut way that gives rise to truly national patterns of political behaviour. He or she participates more directly than ever before in the electoral process and expresses a political mind sharply and decisively. Reflecting this evolved character of electoral behaviour, public opinion polls have begun to catch up with the popular mood more accurately, an observation that can be sustained by examining the results turned out by some of the major national polls this time, including the FRONTLINE-IMRB public opinion survey published in THE HINDU on the eve of the elections. But what are the qualitative factors making for the ruling party's overpowering victory in the Eighth General Elections? The most important would appear to be the powerful mass urge for keeping India united and as one, free from the dangers of internal threats such as the Punjab crisis and external aggression. This is linked up, of course, with the "sympathy factor" that has worked magically for Mr. Rajiv Gandhi—in favour of his taking over as Prime Minister after the vile and brutal slaying of his mother, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The 1984 result expresses at one level a tremendous national, mass protest against the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by a band of anti-national, separatist terrorists. The other side of this phenomenon is the overwhelming endorsement of the son and political inheritor at the level of the common man and woman, rendering criticisms and allegations of "dynastic rule" and so forth irrelevant. Under the tragic circumstances, there was no credible Opposition challenge on a national scale. Whereas Mr. Rajiv Gandhi campaigned simply on his party's ability to hold India strong and united, the Opposition found itself performing in a cramped and inhibited way, bringing up few issues that made sense to the voters. Too much is perhaps made of the alleged disunity of the Opposition parties—this time, indices of their effective unity suggested a better prospect for them, thanks to seat adjustments, than in 1980—but there is no question that the inability of the Opposition campaigners at the national level to inspire voters with their programmes and policies explains the larger-than-life margin of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's victory. The other major point that needs to be made even now, before a new Government takes over, is that while it is a vote for rootedness and much that the people can identify with emotionally from the recent past, it must also be read as an impressive mandate for change—in the sense expectations have been aroused of a vastly improved performance from the Government.