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MRS GANDHI AND THE OPPOSITION

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THE tone and content of Mrs. Gandhi's sustained attacks on the opposition parties in recent weeks reveal a certain style of politics and a definite concept of the role she expects the opposition to play when she holds the reins of power. That the style and the concept are utterly inimical to the norms and values of a democracy is fairly obvious. But, together they reveal also—and far more clearly than do the proposals for a presidential system or for a restricted parliament which leading Congress(I) leaders have been advocating—the kind of polity which Mrs. Gandhi wishes to establish in the country.

The recent attacks are nothing new. They are strikingly reminiscent of those which were launched in 1972 as the economic difficulties mounted and, in consequence, disenchantment with the ruling party set in. They were kept up till Mrs. Gandhi lost power in 1977. The pattern and purpose of the attacks then, as now, are astonishingly similar.

One would have thought that the general election of March 1977 marked a break from the past. But Mrs. Gandhi's record in opposition thereafter, and particularly after her return to power in January 1980, suggests this view to be wholly mistaken. Mrs. Gandhi surely did not go to the polls to gamble. She did so because in the face of a divided and demoralised opposition, she very confidently hoped to win and have her policies and measures ratified with a mandate to go further. Thanks very largely to Jayaprakash Narayan, the opposition united and the electorate proved Mrs. Gandhi's calculations wrong.

The disturbing aspect is that since her return to power, Mrs. Gandhi has demonstrated time and again that as far as she is concerned, history took a holiday from March 1977 to January 1980. The period was a non-event. It does not exist except perhaps as a nightmare which must be banished from memory. The threads must be picked up from where they were left off in March 1977 and the policies of old resumed—a presidential system, dynastic succession, browbeating the judiciary by transfer of judges, threats to the press, demoralising the civil services and the rest.

Crucial to the success of these policies is a weak and divided opposition. A consistent feature of the attacks on the opposition during the last decade is that the tone becomes shriller as soon as the opposition shows any signs of coalescing. The recent barrage, for instance, began in

earnest last month immediately in the wake of the moves for opposition unity. The opening salvo was fired on December 23 when Mrs. Gandhi accused the opposition parties of carrying on a "malicious and vicious campaign" against her on the questions of law and order, corruption, and caste and communal conflicts. A week later, she characterised the opposition's "unprincipled unity move" as a threat to national integration. They had no common ideology and sought only to gain power.

It is pointless to argue that the alliances which Mrs. Gandhi negotiated in 1979 and before were no more principled. Mrs. Gandhi could not be unaware of that. According to her the "whole strategy" of the opposition has been "to try to alienate" from her party those who supported it—the working class, the farmers, the minorities. Harijans and women. It is futile, again, to point out that this is a very legitimate function of the opposition. Mrs. Gandhi knows that. She claimed it as a right when she was in the opposition. When asked, on February 7, 1980, if her party was not taking political advantage of the Narainpur incident, which happened when a Lok Dal ministry was in power, Mrs. Gandhi retorted. "Why should we not take advantage of other parties' failures?"

But similar conduct on the part of the opposition is regarded as an attempt "to bring down the government.... Is that democratic? But what we put from our opposition, I can say with all the emphasis at my command, no country in Europe or America will allow this." (sic.) Mrs. Gandhi told a Western journalist last month. The hint that the opposition functions on sufferance, rather than as of right, has been heard before. So has been the charge, made on January 4, that a section of the press is "giving leadership to the opposition." So, also, the accusation that the opposition is acting against the national interest (January 3) and is playing a disruptionist role (January 8). On the basis of past performance it is not unlikely that before long Mrs. Gandhi will accuse the opposition of having "a foreign connection" and of harbouring the vilest designs.

In the five years from 1972 to 1977 such charges were flung with an acerbity and a consistency which ruled out even the minimum confidence that should exist between the government and the opposition for successful working of a democratic system. Charges of violence were coupled with dark hints that the opposition was responsible for the murder of Mr. L. N. Mishra. To charges of instigation by foreign powers was added the detail that their money filled the coffers of opposition leaders. Refusal of any dialogue with the opposition would be followed by bitter complaint of their non-co-operation. It was, all in all, an attack on the integrity of the opposition in such terms as to suggest that the very legitimacy of their existence was in question. But Mrs. Gandhi needed an opposition all the time; as a whipping boy presently, and eventually, hopefully, as a domesicated showpiece to embroider the democracy of her conception. If these words seem harsh, see the record of the period 1972 to 1977. They hold lessons for all today.

The second half of 1972 saw a revival of political conflict in an extremely acute form. Mrs. Gandhi had won a massive mandate in the

1971 general election and tackled the Bangladesh crisis with remarkable skill. Success in the state assembly elections in early 1972 was followed by the successful summit with Mr. Bhutto at Simla. But extreme economic difficulties reared their head and the opposition began to criticise the government's handling of the crisis. Mrs. Gandhi reacted to the criticism violently.

As she recalled during the emergency in an interview with Maurice Edelman, published in *The Times* (London) on November 15, 1975, "After the March 1971, we had two years of economic difficulties which led, in turn, to political difficulties. We had a severe drought. Prices of grain rose. This was followed by the fuel crisis and inflation. All this led to a shortage of essential commodities which provided a basis for an agitation to bring down the government by pressure and intimidation."

While the Congress President, Mr. S. D. Sharma, accused the top opposition leaders of being "under the sway" of the CIA (September 21, 1972), Mrs. Gandhi said (September 27) "they are playing into the hands of such foreign forces which hate to see India strong." They were, she added, propagating the cult of violence, thereby undermining the unity of the country. At the AICC meeting on October 9, Mrs. Gandhi, while condemning the CIA for its interference in India's affairs, remarked that "certain external elements" had helped internal elements that had been opposed to her policies.

A *mantra* had been coined which was to be repeated. At a meeting in Patiala on March 23, 1973, Mrs. Gandhi alleged that the opposition was tarnishing the country's image abroad by its character assassination of people in high places and by its stories of corruption. Some of the opposition parties acted at the behest of foreign powers which did not want India to be strong.

Mrs. Gandhi was playing rough. What is more, she wanted people to know that she could play rougher still. It was at this meeting that she painted a self-portrait far more revealing than any done by any artist. Describing herself as a tougher politician than her father, Mrs. Gandhi remarked that while Nehru was "a saint who came into politics by mistake" and because of the need of the hour, she herself was "born in the thick of politics. I have seen its ups and downs from childhood. Therefore, I have more vitality and experience to face the opposition challenge."

The capacity to fight it rough was amply displayed as the political conflict got exacerbated and "JP" launched his famous movement. On April 1, 1974, Mrs. Gandhi made a personal attack on JP.

Mrs. Gandhi used the weapon of innuendo none too subtly. "It is said that those who are organising anti-government demonstrations are getting foreign money. I do not know if they are getting foreign money but if they are, is it for constructive purposes?" she asked at Rourkela on March 8, 1975. The debate was made an increasingly personal one. They are "against me", not against the party, she said on April 21, 1975. In this atmosphere came the Allahabad judgment.

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Mrs. Gandhi's response to the opposition's criticism, in the wake of the judgment, was ominous. She told a Boat Club rally in New Delhi on June 20, 1975, that in many foreign countries people asked her how she allowed the things the opposition was doing. Quite apart from the fact that the opposition did not owe its existence to her goodwill, the impropriety of such foreign interest seems to have been lost on Mrs. Gandhi.

But it became a favourite theme and was repeated often. She told the Rajya Sabha on July 22, 1975, and again on January 8, 1976, that every single visitor who came to India before the emergency had one question for her, "Well, Mrs. Gandhi, do you think that if you continue like this you can survive?" Several ambassadors had called on her, at the instance of their heads of state, to draw her attention to the situation here. Mrs. Gandhi, apparently, relished such foreign intervention in the country's affairs.

After the emergency was proclaimed, all restraint was abandoned. It is, however, not the wild charges which Mrs. Gandhi freely hurled at the opposition which should interest us today. It is her concept of an opposition which bears recalling, for it reflected her true feelings.

To begin with, freedom was regarded as a gift in her bounty. "The fault is ours that we were so tolerant, gave them so much of freedom." The press was clubbed—and clobbered—together with the opposition. "Lately, many leading newspapers were spearheading the campaign against the government and undermining the morale and self-confidence of the people" (July 9, 1975); the press was not only supporting the opposition, it was "in fact guiding it" (September 27, 1975).

There would be no return to pre-emergency days, she declared in a major speech in the Lok Sabha on July 22, 1975. "The question is asked, where do we go from here and when do we return to normalcy. First, we have to decide what is normalcy". The withdrawal of the emergency hinged on the opposition accepting Mrs. Gandhi's definition of normalcy. It was told explicitly on February 24, 1976, that the withdrawal would be considered "only if all the opposition leaders gave a clear assurance that they would not adopt an agitational approach," specifically, that they would not start satyagrahas or gheraos, agitations, hartals, indulge in violence or demand the resignation of legislators.

Far from accepting these humiliating terms, the opposition leaders outside prison tried to unite under JP's leadership. Mrs. Gandhi was incensed at this and asked (May 26) if their move meant the "same old indiscipline" and "disruption" or a "new direction" to the country. "Do we have so much money, time and strength as to permit policies of disruption which weaken the country's unity and threaten its independence?"

Yet, to such an opposition, whose leaders she repeatedly accused of receiving money from abroad, Mrs. Gandhi claimed (November 22) to have "stretched my hand of friendship and this has not been responded to". She wanted a "change of heart" before negotiations could begin.

"Will they co-operate for the sake of the country or still indulge in violence, destruction and demolition?"

The terms were finally laid down with admirable precision in Mrs. Gandhi's letter to Mr. Asoka Mehta, dated December 23, 1976 : "Once there is a genuine acceptance of the changes that have taken place and a clear disavowal of communal and separatist policies, a repudiation of the policies of violence and extra-constitutional action, and also a constructive approach to social change; then it would not be impossible to find solutions to the problems between opposition and government."

If, after the opposition rejected these terms, Mrs. Gandhi went to the polls less than month later, it was surely not to abandon the scheme of things envisaged in the letter and the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution. It was to seek their ratification and a mandate to proceed further in the same direction. Her speeches during the election campaign were clear on that point.

"We have now to see that the pre-emergency conditions do not recur again, even after the elections," Mrs. Gandhi said on February 5, 1977. Opposition leaders who compared conditions in India with freedom elsewhere were told, "If they don't like the democracy in our country, they are free to go to those countries they like, or wherever they will, but let them go away. We do not want them here."

Mrs. Gandhi's notion of the Prime Minister's status was as exaggerated as her notion of the opposition was disparaging. "The Prime Minister represents the entire country and any attack on him or her is an attack on the entire people. The abuses being hurled at me by the opposition are tarnishing the image of India," she said on February 20. Towards the end of the election campaign (March 17, 1977), Mrs. Gandhi accused the opposition parties and newspapers (sic) of backing out of the promises they gave to the government when the emergency was relaxed.

In the light of such a consistent line, it is not difficult to imagine the policies Mrs. Gandhi would have pursued had she won the election in March 1977. She, who had once (November 24, 1975) asked if the opposition could give a single instance of her having gone wrong, was proved hopelessly wrong in her calculations by the people.

Back in power three years later, Mrs. Gandhi began to speak in the same tone and accent. But with one vital difference. She had been in the opposition, meanwhile, and set examples wholly contrary to her advice to the opposition that "their role should be constructive." While in opposition, Mrs. Gandhi's party freely resorted to street battles, obstruction of parliamentary proceedings, gheraoing of courts, and assaulting policemen. The UP hijackers were given party tickets and the cases against them were withdrawn.

Worse, in 1980 on her visits to non-Congress(I) states, Mrs. Gandhi freely attacked the state governments for not protecting the minorities (November 6 at Srinagar, and November 10 at Trichur), The limit was

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reached when on March 24, 1980, members of the Youth Wing of the Congress(I) in West Bengal imposed an economic blockade of Assam.

The opposition, therefore, need not be inhibited by Mrs. Gandhi's censures. She will respect them more if they demonstrate a grit even remotely comparable to hers. What the opposition needs to understand is that our democratic constitution is living on borrowed time. For far too long it has functioned without a vital component — a viable, working party system. This has been India's greatest failure since independence.

A constitution provides only the bare skeleton for a polity. It is the politics, through the party system, which provide the flesh and blood. In the absence of the essential check of a credible alternative to the ruling party, an disproportionately heavy responsibility for checking abuse of power has fallen on other institutions — the judiciary and the press to mention two. The electoral system itself mandates a national alternative even if it consists of an effective coalition rather than a single party. But the preconditions are not only unity but credibility, an ability to take over the government and run it on the basis of a concrete programme.

Unfortunately the opposition parties are nowhere near evolving such an alternative. In an article in *Le Monde* some years back, Jean-Jacques Seruan Schereiber wrote, "France can only be made modern, livable and to the people's own measure by transforming the political parties, not by rewriting the laws."

The article was aptly entitled "The people are adults, are the parties?" The people of India have more than once demonstrated their capacity for deliberate electoral choice. It is for the opposition parties to demonstrate their capacity to regain popular confidence. That will be a test of their own worth and their fitness to survive. To a profound extent the survival of the system itself depends on their ability to meet this test.

(Courtesy : *Indian Express*).

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