

Another Election for India—Outlook Murky

D.K. Joshi writes from New Delhi

After four months in office the Indian government of Chandra Shekhar lost the support of the Congress (I) Party led by Rajiv Gandhi and had to resign. A general election will have to be held, barely 18 months after the last one. No party really wants another election so soon, mainly because no one is confident of victory but also because of the huge expense at a time of economic difficulty.

Women at the Sangsad

The search is on by the political parties for candidates who can fill the 30 reserved seats for women at the Jatiya Sangsad. Judging by the fact that over 350 have already applied for nominations from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the interest among our female population in entering the parliament must indeed be great, probably greater than on previous occasions.

At a time when women leaders occupy top positions of the two major parties, many wonder if there is much justification for the allocation of reserved seats for female members at the Sangsad. Just now, our answer to the question remains on the affirmative. The rise of selected women leaders to leadership positions in the two parties, the BNP and the Awami League, does not necessarily prove that women's participation in national politics, especially at the parliamentary level, has reached a satisfactory level. But we would certainly hope that it won't be long before women themselves seek the end of the present preferential system.

Meanwhile, we urge upon the political parties to consider carefully as to what kind of women candidates should enter the race. Since the election will be by secret ballot, we like to think that the BNP, with its reported alliance with the Jamaat, will not necessarily capture all the 30 seats and that other parties, including AL, will also have their share. Here, much depends on what kind of candidates are nominated by the parties. In our view, the parties should look for some outstanding women, especially from the field of social work, instead of traditional party loyalists who want to be rewarded for their allegiance to the leaders. If the approach is thus depoliticised and the emphasis is placed on both social commitment and expertise, successful candidates would certainly make a valuable contribution to the parliamentary discussion on such issues as family planning, employment for women, the dowry system and the drive for female education. The Sangsad, indeed the country as a whole, will certainly benefit from hearing authentic women's voices on these — and other — issues. Again, the parties should not confine their attention to university graduates or to the products of urban centres. There should be women activists in rural Bangladesh, like some of the newly-appointed directors of the Grameen Bank, who may also deserve to take their place in our parliament. This is surely one way of giving the Jatiya Sangsad a grassroots appeal, making it especially relevant to all sections of our people.

At some point, the next government may also consider new ways of increasing the participation of women in administration, especially at the decision-making level. A woman Cabinet Minister is almost certain to be in charge of "Women's Affairs". But, then, why should anyone assume that another woman cannot be in charge of education, health or information? And aren't there women officials qualified enough to be director-generals or secretaries of ministries? The fact that the next elected Prime Minister will be a woman certainly seems a dramatic achievement. But the country is also looking for a breakthrough on a much broader question, namely, the participation of women in our national affairs.

For a New-look BTV

Bangladesh Television authorities are seeking viewers' opinion on programmes put out by BTV. This is a most welcome piece of news, assuming the feedback will have the desired impact.

We accept that BTV has to operate within certain parameters of political and social constraints. But we also hope that, with the emergence of a freer, more liberal atmosphere in the political arena, such constraints will become less pronounced, if not altogether extinct.

The single-channel BTV has had monopoly control over the airwaves and advertising revenue since its birth. Unfortunately, such a favourable position has not been utilised to improve standards of programmes to any recognisable degree. A change over from monochrome to colour does not necessarily mean progress. Ministry of Information limitations may have hampered BTV efforts to improve its news presentation as well as programmes related to socio-political issues. But the same cannot be said of its light entertainment offerings, where standards vary and imagination is lacking. Heavy educational and religious programmes are often slotted in during peak viewing hours when viewers are really looking for relief from the drudgery of the day.

Television should redefine its role to suit the changing times. It would be unrealistic to expect BTV to change overnight from being a government spokesman, to an independent broadcaster. The real initiative to make BTV a truly independent, autonomous corporation, free of Ministry of Information control, can only come from the government. A Magna Carta for broadcasting is what we expect from an elected, representative government, without any interference or brow-beating from any quarter. But BTV must initiate moves to reform itself from within and prepare the ground for future change. Greater professionalism in presentation, particularly in news and socio-political programmes, is badly needed. Timing of programmes and the quality of programmes themselves ought to receive more thought.

Bangladesh Television does not lack money; what it lacks are imagination and initiative. But it would do well to remember that its monopoly position does not carry a life time guarantee. In an age of satellite broadcasting, BTV can no longer hide behind its Rampura fortress and consider itself immune to change. It can begin by looking towards the viewing public for direction, not the Ministry of Information.

INDIA has not been able, after all, to avoid a snap poll so soon after the ninth general election in the winter of 1989. President Ramaswamy Venkataraman has indicated the gigantic democratic exercise will take place around mid-May. The parliament has been dissolved paring the way.

Venkataraman was reluctant to burden the nation with huge expenditure — unofficial calculations put it at four billion rupees — particularly at a time when India was passing through a serious economic crisis aggravated by the Gulf war.

He was left with no alternative but to order the democratic exercise. In the end Chandra Shekhar's minority government lasted only four months, although Rajiv Gandhi, leader of the single largest party in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament), had promised to keep the minority government afloat for at least a year.

Gandhi was secretly manipulating to come to power with the help of defectors from the two Janata Dal Parties — one led by former Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh and the other by Shekhar — but all political parties insisted that a popular verdict alone could clear up the mess created by the minority government experiment.

Political pundits are sceptical that a general election can usher in an era of political stability. But they believe the atmosphere will be better than the sickening phase through which the biggest democracy in the world has passed in the last few months.

If there is again a hung parliament, as most political leaders believe, the mood of the political parties will be basically different from what it was after the last general election.

They will be a much better frame of mind psychologically to accept the new political reality of coalition government. In 1989, the non-congress parties did come closer and cooperate with each other but they were unprepared for the formation of a coalition government.

Congress, which ruled almost uninterruptedly for four decades, still dreams of a return to power with an absolute majority. If its illusion is shattered in the midterm poll it will approach politics more realistically and its divine right psyche will change.

Gandhi would have liked the midterm poll early next year — his astrologers had predicted a better future after February 1992 — because his assessment is that the popular mood has not yet turned in his party's favour. He had calculated that in a year's time other political parties would have become further discredited.

He has one advantage this time: the non-Congress parties will not be united. A big factor in the electoral humiliation of Congress in 1989

was that in most of the 528 parliamentary constituencies (elections to 14 seats in Assam could not be held), it was a straight contest between Congress and Opposition candidates.

The rightist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which wants to use the Hindu communal card, will go it alone this time. No secular party is prepared to touch it, even with a bargepole.

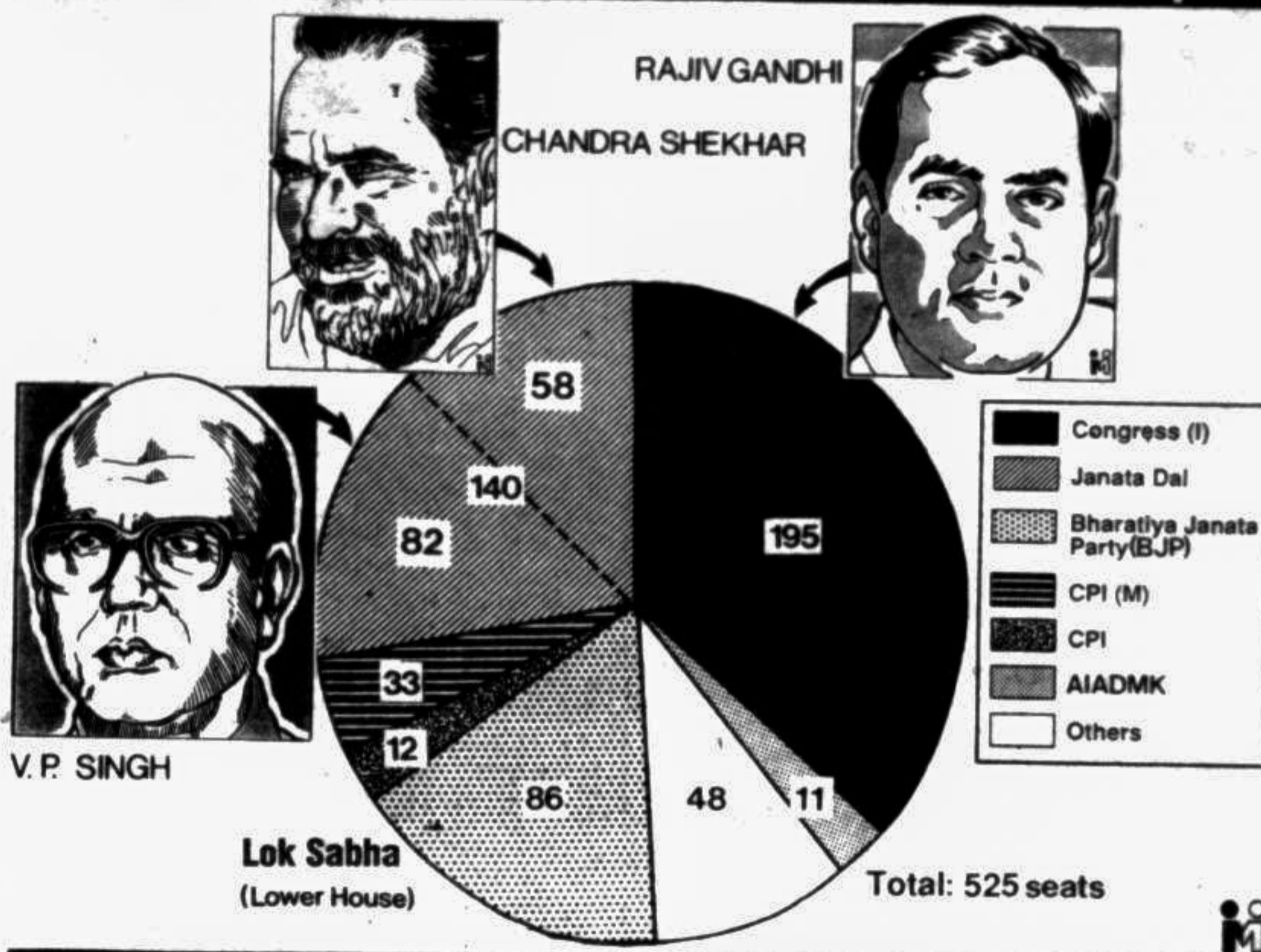
Janata Dal and the Marxist Communist Party-led front will make common electoral cause

with regional parties in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Assam. This combination will vie with Congress for political dominance.

Dal, which secured 139 seats in the Lok Sabha in 1989, has weakened as a result of the split and loss of power in the states — three Dal States were taken over by Chandra Shekhar's party, the Janata Dal (Socialist).

Vishwanath Pratap Singh is banking on the support of backward castes and Muslims and he

India: how parties ended up in 1989 poll



Nawaz Sharif Serves Warmed-over Plans

Babar Ayaz writes from Karachi

This is particularly true for the announced deregulatory measures and incentives for rural industrialisation

PAKISTAN once again sets a course towards rapid industrialisation this time under the leadership of its first industrialist Prime Minister, Mr. Mian Nawaz Sharif.

Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz said the government intends to double the country's industrial base in five years. This means an average annual growth of 20 per cent.

To convince Pakistanis it means business, the government immediately followed its announced goal with an order for the denationalisation of a nationalised commercial bank giving interested private parties only 11 days to bid for the institution.

An invitation was also issued to the private sector to set up an airline.

The government's announcement and subsequent moves are being met with a great deal of scepticism.

The goal of industrialisation has been pursued by every Pakistani government since the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto also made industrialisation a priority of her government.

Since the early 1980s, the government has been trying to encourage the private sector to help hasten the industrialisation of Pakistan.

The less-than-enthusiastic response to Mr. Sharif's "Rapid Industrialisation Policy" is typified by a paid advertisement placed by his own colleagues in the All-Pakistan Textile Mills Association. The advertisement said, "Mr. Prime Minister, your give us land order, we will give you industrialisation."

Much of the Pakistanis' reservation stems from the fact that the package prepared by Mr. Sharif's government in pursuit of industrialisation seems to be just a warmed-over version of similar programmes from his predecessors.

This is particularly true for the announced deregulatory measures and incentives for the industrialisation of rural

areas. Another concern is whether or not Mr. Sharif's deregulation plan will get the support of the Pakistani bureaucracy, which is strongly identified with President Ghulam Ishaq Khan. There are reports that the Ministry of Finance is still under the control of the President and the finance minister himself, Mr. Aziz, is more Mr. Khan's man than Mr. Sharif's.

This perception is giving some people in the business circle cause for concern.

In the past, Mr. Khan has opposed a government policy encouraging the investment of "black money" in industry with no questions, asked. The President called the proposal, when it was atred during the regime of Mr. Zia, "giving premium on dishonesty." He said allowing the occasional laundering of money encourages tax evasion.

Despite his protests, however, Mr. Zia's government adopted policies which allowed the "whitening" of "black money."

Incentives designed to encourage the industrialisation of rural areas also do not strike many Pakistanis as particularly fresh. The only apparent difference is that the new package of incentives gives priority to backward areas, followed by rural and urban areas.

Still, many recall that in the past, regardless of incentives offered, industrialists has been concentrated near Pakistan's major cities.

Industrialists point out that the industrialisation of backward areas is extremely difficult because of lack of infrastructure. These places are also too remote resulting in increased cost of production.

Government policy so far has ignored the fact that industrialisation is only possible where rural society has been

free from feudalism and outdated modes of distribution.

In a country where majority of the rural population does not have any purchasing power, the literacy rate is very low and infrastructure is not available, all incentives for rural industrialisation are of very little use.

It has also been noted that incentives for industrialisation have not been linked to job creation. Government policies have encouraged capital-intensive expansion, particularly the use of automation. Tax breaks and exemptions from duties have encouraged businessmen to import expensive machinery.

Thus, very little has been accomplished in terms of reducing very high unemployment and underemployment rates in Pakistan. The style and speed with which the government has tried to effect the policy of denationalisation, while criti-

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To the Editor...

Richest woman

Sir, Queen Elizabeth II is the richest woman in the world, according to Harpers and Queen magazine. This was possible due to rising price of her jewellery and winning races-horses etc. But one single factor which has helped the accumulation of wealth is the Queen's exemption from taxes. Well whatever may be the reason, it must feel great to be declared the richest among all women in the world. More so, when we all know that women are fond of wealth. For, it is

often said that diamonds are a woman's best friends. And how is she able to get those precious diamonds, until and unless, she is rich? How great the feeling is with HRH the Queen, I don't know. Well I wish my best to those women who have been able to achieve the age-old desire of all women i.e. to be rich!

Romana Hafiz Banani, Dhaka

Fashion show and rural craft

Sir, The photograph and your caption about Aarong's fashion show in your paper

of the 14th March says it all, but my friends and I feel very strongly about it and therefore felt we must write.

Aarong has the nerve to say it is a nonprofit marketing outlet for rural crafts yet its numerous shops are full of mass produced machine made products like dinner sets, metalware etc. The fashion show is the ultimate in contradiction of rural crafts or Bangladeshi ethos. Any excuse of catering for foreign tastes is ridiculous—we are supposed to promote local crafts and styles. Foreign buyers are not the priority;

certainly not if we have to display vulgar outfits like the one in your photograph.

Fayza Huq's article, on the other hand, reflects her reaction to a complimentary invitation rather than her instinctive response.

M. A. Bari Mirpur, Dhaka.

Endeavour

Sir, A person in Berlin is said to have grown his moustache about 1.20 metres in length. He has worked about two years towards achieving this.

Each day he spends about two hours, taking

care of his moustache. Now his moustache has taken a particular shape of which he is quite proud. A recent news item said he was seen displaying it in a very proud manner.

This shows that if we want to do something, it is possible. However it may not work out every time.

Rouf Mojumdar Kathal Bagan.

but at times we are successful in doing what we want to do.

Trial and error in no way should discourage us from trying things we want to do, and strongly believe about.

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.