

On Being Foreign and Being Nationalist

The focus on the foreign origins of Sonia Gandhi as an electoral plank is misplaced, for it distracts from the main question of dynastic rule.

Jayati Ghosh writes

SINCE the campaign for the coming general elections has effectively begun (despite the fact that the election dates are yet to be announced), those issues which politicians feel are likely to be the most important for the electorate are already prominent in the political debate. Going by the current count, one of the most "significant" of such issues seems to be that of the foreign origins of the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi.

In fact, this has been raked up not only by representatives of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is quite predictable, but even by those of the Samajwadi Party and politicians belonging to other parties. And indeed the Congress party itself has risen to the bait, spending much press conference time in reacting to these accusations and stressing the current Indianness of its president.

It is remarkable how this entire discussion has missed the point about what is desirable in a prime ministerial candidate for India. It is also remarkable because it stresses the personality and origins of particular individuals, independent of socio-economic agenda or political motivation. Those on either side of this debate who are currently devoting so much time, energy and resources to it must have a rather poor perception of the political consciousness of the Indian electorate. And this despite recent and continuing evidence that we now have not just the largest but possibly one of the most sophisticated group of voters in the world.

Let us consider the issue of "foreignness" first. This country is no stranger to the involvement of "non-nationals" in domestic politics. Modern Indian history is replete with stories of the committed and crucial contributions of some remarkable people of foreign birth who became closely tied up with the struggle for national independence.

Indeed, the very progenitor of the Congress party, the Indian National Union, was founded in 1854 by two British men, Allan Octavian Hume and Henry Cotton. When this body

assumed the name of Indian National Congress in 1885 at a conference in Calcutta under the presidency of W. C. Bonerjee, it was attended by 72 delegates of both Indian and foreign extraction. In the century and more since then, the Congress has had five presidents of foreign origin, of whom Sonia Gandhi is only the latest. Some of them, such as Sir William Wedderburn, had more than one term. Others, such as Annie Besant, remain household names across the country, still remembered for their signal contribution to the national movement and to social and economic change in the country.

No one in India ever doubted, or even today questions, the commitment and dedication of these and many other "foreigners" to the Indian nationalist cause. So the mere fact of foreign origin *per se* obviously cannot be seen as the basic, or even major, impediment to substantial involvement in Indian politics or ability to become an elected leader of the country.

A further point needs to be noted here. Those who are dismayed or even alarmed at the idea of a "foreigner" becoming the Prime Minister, especially those within the middle class, are quite often those who are themselves seeking foreigner status either for themselves or their near kin. Quite often, those who are shouting the loudest in this matter turn out to be the same people who are desperate to get "Green Card" resident status for their children in the United States, or already have close kin as Non-Resident Indians.

It has frequently been observed that real citizenship is in the mind. And in that context there can be very little doubt that many of the constituents of this country's elite are Indian citizens only in name, with lifestyles, aspirations, affiliations and even identities that belong to the richer countries of the industrialised world. Yet such are the complexities of our world that many such people see no contradiction between this and opposing a politician because of his or her natal origin. It is in-

teresting that the most enthusiastic proponents of the "Hindu bonibi", for example, who also tend to be the most vociferous opponents of a foreign-born Prime Minister, are Non-Resident Indians who do not even deign to live in this country.

This being said, however, it should not be taken to mean that there are no arguments against the possible choice of Sonia Gandhi as Prime Minister. There are in fact some persuasive arguments against such a choice, and it is intriguing that these have hardly been raised in the course of the present discussion.

The most obvious such argument relates to a basic issue that has been at the centre of opposition to Congress-style politics for at least three decades now, and that is the tendency towards dynastic rule. The real problem with the Congress today is not that it has chosen someone with another natal identity to be its president, but that it seems unable to find anyone outside of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty to run its affairs for any reasonable length of time.

This is ultimately what defines the real bankruptcy of this party. And it is a bankruptcy that seems to be more stark and more desperate over time, because it requires less and less prior input from the members of the dynasty themselves. True, Sonia Gandhi has been handed over the control of the party on a platter, but that was due to her husband before her, and even of her mother-in-law to some extent.

But Indira Gandhi had substantial political exposure even before she took control of the Congress, and subsequently had to prove her mettle very quickly. Even Rajiv Gandhi had to devote some time to "helping mummy" before circumstances and fate intervened to make him Prime Minister. But his widow had no such public exposure before the first attempt by the party to make her his successor upon his assassination, and seemed to require no further qualification even eight years later.

This less than minimalist requirement from the Congress

towards its ruling dynasty has a number of unfortunate consequences, quite apart from the generally unpalatable nature of dynastic rule in itself. It means that membership of the "family" dominates all other considerations, which in turn means that the most effective or desirable candidates are not chosen even from within the party.

In the case of Sonia Gandhi, the implications are even more severe. For the first seven years of her widowhood, she distinguished herself chiefly by her sphinx-like capacity to keep everyone guessing. And even to date, hardly anything is known about her ideology, her views on important matters, her general capability in administrative matters, or, more generally, her capacity to govern a country. Like her husband before her, she took complete charge over a major national party without ever having had to fight a single election on her own account. And her charisma is widely believed, even by devoted Congress workers, to lie in her ability to evoke public memory in the name of her husband's family.

So advanced is the Congress party's tendency towards such dependence on this dynasty that its members now speak openly of bringing Priyanka Gandhi into the campaign to add to the supposed swaying of the electorate that the Gandhi name is said to achieve. And once again, the only qualification being sought is that she belong to the family.

This issue is major, but it certainly has nothing to do with foreign origins. Indeed, the problem would have been just as acute had the current Congress president been born in Allahabad, Chennai or Lakshadweep. That is why the focus on foreign origin is not only misplaced but distracts from the main question. Despite all this if the Congress remains a party to reckon with in Indian politics, it reflects the paucity of a sufficiently persuasive and progressive national agenda, and evidence of the will to implement it, among the other parties. And this in turn reflects the relative failure of the political process in India's otherwise vibrant democracy,

Proud and Prejudiced

Liz Mathew writes on how Sonia Gandhi hits out at her detractors

IN a highly emotional speech asserting her Indianness, Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi hit out at her detractors on May 25 but said the question of prime minister would be decided after the September election.

"The people of the country will give a fitting reply to those who have questioned my patriotism," Sonia Gandhi said amidst prolonged applause and the loud slogans that reverberated around the Talkatora indoor stadium where her party held an extraordinary plenary session.

In her first public speech after her resignation from the post of party president more than a week ago, Gandhi was responding to the questions raised by a clutch of rebels about her eligibility to become prime minister because of her Italian extraction. As tiered ranks of party workers in the 2,000 capacity stadium chanted slogans in her support and against her critics, Sonia in an attacking speech, which she mostly read out from a prepared text, said she had come back to take over the party once again because she has "seen so much of love and affection from people from all corners of the country."

However, on the question of prime ministerhood, she said that it will be decided, as before, by elected Congress members of Parliament.

It was a strong and determined Gandhi that promised her partymen that she will not "disappoint" them as the last few days of "agony" had given her an opportunity to "recognise her real friends in the party."

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which is its inability as yet to move the real issues of the day onto the centre-stage of parliamentary politics.

The main question, therefore, is not even about the real qualifications that various prime ministerial candidates bring to the job. Rather, it is about which policies they are likely to promote. In the past decade, the Indian electorate has demonstrated over and over again its general unhappiness with the policies being pursued by the succession of governments in the country, by voting them out whenever they are given the chance. Currently, besides Sonia the other buzz-



Gandhi had resigned from the post of president on May 17 after three senior leaders of the party - Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma and Tariq Anwar - had written a letter questioning her credentials. She agreed to withdraw her resignation late last night after a renewed appeal from the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the highest policy making body of the party, following tremendous pressure on them from party workers and state leaders.

"I stand before you now as a proud Congress member, doubly resolved to lead the party," she said and added those who had even the slightest doubt in their mind about her should "choose their own path."

In words calculated to evoke sympathy, she said, "Thirty-one years ago India accepted me

when I came to this land as Indira's daughter-in-law. This country is in me in every moment of my life. I married here, I became a mother here, and I became a widow in front of your eyes."

"This country's greatest daughter, Indira Gandhi, breathed her last in my arms. Each drop of my blood says India is my motherland. This is my motherland," she said.

In her 20-minute rhetoric reminiscent of her mother in law, Sonia Gandhi accused the expelled party rebels of joining hands with communal forces. She said she had resigned from the party as she was "disappointed."

Accusing the detractors of joining hands with "those forces whom I came to fight with," she recalled how the

same leaders - whom she did not name - came to her with folded hands a year ago to request her to lead the party even though she was reluctant to do so for seven years after her husband's death.

"They want to sow the seeds of disbelief about my patriotism in the minds of the people and are hand in glove with those forces," she said in a stirring speech, every word of which was lapped by an audience of 1,400 delegates.

"She said the crisis in the last few days would also help the partymen make a new beginning," You have kindled hope in me. You have given me assurance. You have entrusted me with duty. I will not disappoint you," she said.

Switching to English from Hindi "for colleagues in south India and the northeast (who did not speak the language)," she said she can "no longer tolerate those people who seek to attack a woman through calumny and falsehood, seek to divide brothers and indulge in politics of hate."

Earlier the party plenary passed a resolution expressing its deep gratitude to her for taking back her resignation and reiterated that the party will fight the election under Sonia Gandhi's leadership.

There were some surprise delegates at the meeting. Many of them were one time associates of Pawar. They included former Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee president Ranjit Deshmukh besides former MPs Prithviraj Chauhan and Suresh Kamath, who were once considered to be in "Pawar's camp."

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Serving Pakistan's Interests

If one is to leave passion and politics out of the Friday Times affair, Najam Sethi in India sounding like a prophet of doom for Pakistan was actually a show of Pakistan's strength, not its weakness, says Syed Talat Hussain

lems was a truly free and independent country where there was complete independence of press and expression. It showed that the country was strong enough to see itself in any mirror held up to its face. Above all it showed that it is a country which is thinking about itself, about its problems, about their solutions, about its future — all signs of a healthy people who instead of falling into a sense of false and snug complacency about their affairs keep an eternal vigil, the only price of real freedom can be maintained.

If self criticism, false or true, right or wrong, exaggerated or realistic, could weaken the foundations of a country or pose a mortal danger to its security, as the government claims has been done by Mr Sethi's speech, then the United States of America would have been the weakest state on earth. Without holding up the US as a model country, at least in criti-

cism of officials, politicians, and the State itself, there is nothing which cannot be said — and almost nothing. And yet nations of security is not jeopardised and there is no danger to the fundamentals of the country which are strong as ever. Agreed that there is media nationalism in the US as well, and that is why seldom if ever the mainstream journalists tend to take strong exception to the basic parameters of US foreign policy. But then going by how the Indian press reported on Mr Sethi's speech, he too came across as a strong nationalist himself on Kashmir.

Without labouring the point, if we want to live in a genuinely strong society, and if we want to cultivate lasting democratic traditions, we cannot muffle voices of criticism against government, against what is happening in the country and against what is happening to the country.

The government by taking

Mr Sethi's speech in stride and allowing an independent counter-viewpoint to emerge in the Press to his bleak prognosis could have nurtured the existing traditions of free speech. But that would have been a rational course to take, something this government like most governments in Pakistan is not famous for doing. Driven by its piffing political considerations of saving public face over the BBC documentary — which will be aired in any case — and to settle old scores with Mr Sethi, the government has gone overboard trying to shave fluff and what has been the result. A glorious mess and a foreign policy problem with all the countries whose goodwill we have been trying to achieve for the last one year in the wake of the May nuclear explosions. There has also been stern international reaction. In an exceptionally strongly-worded statement from the State De-

partment blasts the government of Pakistan for its handling of journalists. The Statement expressed a "deep US concern over the recent crackdown on members of the press by the Government of Pakistan" saying that "continuation of this crackdown is certain to raise serious doubts within the international community about the commitment of the government of Pakistan to freedom of the press and the rule of law." Amnesty International has described the arrests and detention of journalists as "part of a pattern of press intimidation", particularly of those who are critical of government. "The government of Pakistan must immediately release Najam Sethi and others detained and arrested during the past few weeks...The authorities must ensure that no other journalists are prevented from carrying out their professional duties for fear of physical violence," the statement

read. The European Union has also issued a strong condemnatory statement.

"The EU is deeply concerned by recent arrests of journalists critical of the government of Pakistan...The EU wants to pursue co-operation with Pakistan and respect for human rights and democratic principles are an essential element of this co-operation." The New York based committee to Protect Journalists has already written two letters to Prime Minister of Pakistan in which it "strongly protests the latest wave of government-sponsored attacks against independent journalists working in Pakistan." "As an organisation of journalists dedicated to the defence of our colleagues around the world, CJP is deeply concerned that your government appears to be conducting an orchestrated campaign to intimidate the Press."

As for the Indians, they must be gloating with joy looking at us as a country where journalists are detained where petitions on basic civil rights and liberties are thrown out of courts on flimsy grounds and which in less than a week has acquired the international image of a police state. Yes we have served the interest of Pakistan very well.

Troublesome Unions

Labour problems dog West Bengal's industrial showpiece, reports Krittivas Mukherjee, from Calcutta

THE Marxist government of West Bengal is facing a serious problem on the labour front which is threatening to jeopardise the industrial revival in the eastern state.

The Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union wing of the ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), has declared a virtual war against its own government over the recruitment policy of the state's industrial showpiece—the nearly Rs 52 billion (\$1.23 billion) Haldia Petrochemicals Project.

CITU has threatened to bring the project, expected to be commissioned in September — to a grinding halt. The union, which disrupted work by holding a gate meeting last Saturday, has warned that it would go on a four-day strike next month if the management did not take immediate steps to meet the workers' demands. CITU has demanded that the management consider the case of casual workers and displaced persons for regular employment. The evictees comprise 1,000 families which had been displaced by the project.

The union has also warned against recruitment of semi-skilled and skilled workers from outside West Bengal, alleging that about 250 people from other states had been appointed even for menial jobs. It wants recruitment for new jobs at the project site, to the state government among the 15,000 temporary workers at the site, besides allocation of at least one job for a member of each displaced family.

Declares CPI-M parliamentarian and CITU leader Lakshman Seth: "We won't budge an inch from our demand." He further asks, "If Mitsubishi (which is also building a chemical plant at Haldia) and other firms can appoint locals and give them in-service training, why not this firm?"

Adds Chittabrata Majumder, CITU state secretary: "Our demand for jobs for the evictees is lawful. So what is the objection?" The project, which is a joint venture of the state government, the Tata Industrial group and the U.S.-based Chatterjee group, is the biggest investment in the state so far. However it has been dogged by a funds crunch. The state government is looking for a fourth equity partner to meet a deficit amounting to Rs 5 billion (\$119 million).

The labour trouble has compounded the financial problems. Says a union spokesman: "We will not allow

the authorities to commission the project on time despite knowing the fact that the stoppage of each day's work might increase the project cost at a rate of Rs 30 million (\$714,285) per day."

Besides the financial woes, the management is also apprehensive that the contractors would turn their backs on the project in view of the uncertainty. The issue even seems to have divided the ruling CPI-M. While state Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta says that there is no harm in recruiting locals for skilled jobs thereby strengthening CITU's cause, acting Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya says that the government would not tolerate any agitation on the issue.

The government is making desperate attempts to solve the problem. It has requested the management to consider if the evictees' demands for employment could be given priority. The government is reportedly formulating a "workable package" for local workers. It is also working on a proposal which classifies preference in employment in the project.

As per the proposal, eligible candidates from the displaced families would be given first preference while the second preference would go to candidates passing out of the technical institutes in Haldia. The third choice would be those who pass out from the other technical institutions of the state while the last choice would be qualified people from other states.

Nearly 10,000 workers held demonstrations outside the gate on May 24. The agitation has heightened the sense of insecurity among hundreds of project engineers and technicians from other states who are working on the project. The reported assault and abduction of a technician allegedly by CITU activists on Saturday has further compounded matters.

Amid all the tension, the adverse impact of the agitation on the industrial climate of the state will be closely watched. Asked if the agitation would not affect industrialisation of the state, CITU leader Majumder says, "There is no labour trouble in the state. It is a bogey raised by the owners who prefer to pay mafias and rebels but won't face organised labour."

He claims that industrialists shift their units elsewhere for their own convenience and then blame the trade unions for it. But just how many people agree with him is a debatable issue.

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Chandrika's Mission Unfinished

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

try.

The election of the Peoples Alliance itself brought about a calm in the battle fronts in Jaffna peninsula as well as in the eastern province in a combined area of which Verupillai Prabhakaran, the mystique leader of the Tamil Tigers wants to deliver his people an "ealam" — a homeland of their own. For a while, there appeared an atmosphere of understanding and reconciliation. Even a peace talk of sorts ensued in October 1994 for the first time between the warring parties of Sri Lanka.

After several rounds of negotiations however the Tamil Tigers struck a rude surprise to the authority by attacking Trincomalee in the East thus marking an explosive end to the peace talks with Chandrika government. A baffled authority in Colombo apparently took some time to understand that it was only the part of the Tiger strategy to gain time for embarking on a bigger offensive. It was indeed a spectacular show of force, on the part of the Tigers who then escalated the war also to the air and sea.

While admitting that Chandrika's was the only government to recognise the genuine grievances of the Tamils — ironically the Tamil rebels themselves broke off talks and fired the first salvo in the renewed phase of the violence from early 1995, it was evident that an all out hostility between the new government and LTTE (Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam) would break out despite Chandrika's decision to go ahead with comprehensive political package as sounded earlier to resolve the island's ethnic problem once for all.

But even here Chandrika

had to strike a delicate balance between what maximum she could give to the rebels and how would that be backed by her people in the south. She also had to take into account the island's military balance after the Tigers again took the warpath and willy-nilly used her military option.

After a shifting balance of military gains on either sides the war was now taken to Tigers' land itself under the code name of "Leap forward". In July 1995 perhaps in the biggest ever government operation against the Tigers' stronghold in Jaffna peninsula the government launched 10,000 strong Sri Lankan forces. But the government forces hardly leapt forward and often stumbled before the battle hardened LTTE militants. However by the end of the year there was a turning point in the military situation giving the government a pronounced edge over the Tamil insurgents at least in the conventional battle. In terrorist operation the LTTE remained as dead as before.

The Tigers had been ejected by the Army from their strongholds in Jaffna by mid-'96. Now to secure the road linking the government-held town of Vanuavia in the south of the peninsula to Kilinochi, 75 km to the north, the government threw another 20,000 troops into operation called "Savar Kurai" (Certain Victory) in May '97. By the end of the year only the half of the objectives of the operation were achieved at a heavy cost. The war still continues.

The independent analysts

agreed that the Tigers had been considerably weakened as a result but by no means beaten. In the meantime, the years of patient diplomacy by Colombo bore fruit when in October '97 the US classified the LTTE as a foreign terrorist organisation taking some steam out of the outfit. Nevertheless, a lot more ground had to be captured before the desired supply route was firmly under control. Above all, the Tigers still retained a frightening terrorist capability which they demonstrated even in late 1997 by blasting Colombo's newest and tallest building, the World Trade Centre.

The military victories to implement peace package from a position of advantage is not without precedence in the history of conflict. But can President Chandrika achieve both in a country riddled with shattered economy, political polarisation and the danger of ethnic conflict which seems to have already reached a point of no-return? The PA which came to office pledging peace is running out of its tenure with peace nowhere in sight.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga also remains unable to deliver on her pledge of abolishing the executive presidency which is intricately connected with the restoration of peace. The substitution of powerful office she now holds with a titular presidency and reversion to Westminster form of government is part of a new constitution the government has already drafted. This is chiefly to meet Tamil aspirations by converting Sri Lanka into a union

of regions with substantial devolution of power and contingent upon Tigers' acceptance of the package.

However politically there is a wide gap between Chandrika's proposed devolution of power and an irreversible goal of the Tamil rebels: an independent homeland in the north-east of Sri Lanka. Can this gap be bridged or even narrowed? An embattled Chandrika is genuinely in pursuit of a real peace to salvage her country from an inherited imbroglio while the rebels are still trekking a perilous path as demonstrated through their response to the devolution package. It was a stunning bomb blast only three days after the release of peace plan.

The devolution package put together in consultation with moderate Tamil political parties is resisted by many of the Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese including a section of influential Buddhist clergy. Importantly, the LTTE which unilaterally broke a cease-fire agreed upon with PA government and withdrew from the peace talks has played no part in drafting the package. While Ms Kumaratunga hopes that satisfying minority aspirations for greater power in the Tamil areas would result in the isolation of the LTTE, the critics argue that any deal without LTTE would be sterile as the Tigers would continue their separatist war.

In the meantime the ruling PA has managed to win four out of five provincial councils in last month's poll and emerged the largest single party in the fifth. The opposition UNP is in a neck-and-neck race to finish a close second. The PA is now in power in all six provinces