

SAARC

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 raised 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 Indianess of its

president. The 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 not 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. Bonnerjee, 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, served 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.

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 national 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.

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 national origin. It is

This less than minimalist requirement from the Congress

interesting that the most enthusiastic proponents of the "Hindu born" 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.

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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 buzzword is "stability", which at one level simply expresses the elite's desire that the electorate be kept out of such serious matters as "liberalisation" and the making of money. It is not just an accident that every government from V.P. Singh to Vajpeyi's promised the electorate that it would reverse the liberalisation policies of its predecessor, and proceeded to do just the opposite. The ensuing instability is comfortably put down to caste and region. However, unlike these, but like the idea of "liberalisation", the instability of the Indian political system is only a decade old.

The people of India do care



Proud and Prejudiced

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

In a highly emotional speech asserting her Indianess, 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 of people from all corners of the country.

However, on the question of prime ministership, 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."

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 enthused 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 Kumar, who were once considered to be in "Pawar's camp".

— India Abroad News Service

There is much in the speech Najam Sethi, the kidnapped editor of the *Friday Times*, made in Delhi which is disagreeable. It was not a work of great erudition and learning to begin with. His depressing depiction of the present-day realities in Pakistan was exaggerated. And frankly, some parts of the speech gave an objective reader the sick. The entire lecture was pitched to shock the audience into listening. But whether or not he should have painted Pakistan as a crisis-afflicted country in India — still the enemy land the Lahore Declaration, the Lahore Fort entertainment and business in sugar notwithstanding, is an ethical issue.

But how the government has dealt with Mr Sethi and the subsequent barrage of accusations against him of being a potential agent of "hostile intelligence agencies" has turned this into a constitutional, legal and national security issue. This is most illogical and counter-productive.

If we are to leave passions and politics out of the whole affair for a moment, Mr Sethi in India sounding like a prophet of doom for Pakistan was a show of our strength and not of weakness. It showed that Pakistan, despite its many prob-

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 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 — well almost nothing. And yet national 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 piffling 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 his standing as a journalist flat. 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 condemnation 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 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 government 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 be made from among the 15,000 temporary workers at the site, besides allocation of at least one job for a member of each displaced family.

Despite the victory the PA feels hardly comfortable not only because of close race but also for the re-emergence of JVP (Janata Vimukt Peramana) which has been cutting into PA's vote base as well as Tamil votes increasingly going to the UPA. This pattern, they fear, will persist both in parliament and which had been displaced by the project.

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 passed 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.

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.

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