‘‘No Room for Vengeance’’
An Interview With Indira Gandhi

Ralph Buultjens

Indira Gandhi looks more frail than when I last saw her almost two years ago. Running a vast, complex nation almost singlehandedly has left telling marks. The demands of power, the trauma of political setbacks, and the surprise of postelection vituperation extract a high price from psychological and intellectual resources. Yet Mrs. Gandhi’s cool intelligence and incisive manner are unimpaired, and her overloaded appointment schedule testifies to her physical stamina. In a long and discursive discussion she developed what she now thought about both domestic and international events and about the themes that underlie her worldview. All together an unusual blend of detail and vision, of minor fact and large-scale concept, they present revealing insights into personality, policies, and contemporary political happenings.

India remains, after Mrs. Gandhi’s decisive and surprising defeat, a deeply troubled land. Six months after a tumultuous election, the euphoria that embraced the victory of the Janata party is dissipating. Prices are rising, crime and lawlessness increase, attacks on the socially underprivileged escalate, labor unrest surges, and production declines are evident. A public mood of disaffection surfaces, especially among the poor. The postelectoral honeymoon between the political conglomerate that took office in March and the many millions who supported it seems to be ending.

Politics mirrors this confusing and often negative picture. In power, entrenched with a large parliamentary majority, is a government that is an amalgam of differing ideologies, strategies, and visions of India. The Janata party is an umbrella erected over its five political components for the purpose of organizing an election campaign. The rewards of success at the polls, key Cabinet positions, are shared among three principle groups. A group of near-octogenarians of somewhat unbending puritanism and chauvinistic impulse led by eighty-two-year-old Prime Minister Morarji Desai holds the portfolios of planning, finance, and home affairs. A younger and vigorously organized group of religious-conservatives, with political roots implanted in militant Hindu fundamentalism, occupies the ministries of foreign affairs, information and broadcasting, and communications. A group of opportunistic latecomers, mainly defectors from the former governing Congress party, is responsible for defense, the petroleum and chemicals industries, and some lesser functions. A few old-time Socialists and parochial ideologues control other departments of state. The godfather of this heterogeneous construction is Jayaprakash Narayan, an ailing and austere figure, who does not hold public office and has withdrawn into a detached Gandhian life-style occasionally broken by Olympian and often querulous statements. Amazingly, this variegated coalition of an old Congress Organization faction, the Jan Sangh movement, the Congress for Democracy, the Socialists, and a few others got itself elected and has held together since. Neither a party nor an organization in the conventional sense, the Janata retains a substantial but eroding popularity.

In opposition is a fragmented Congress party. The once mighty, well-oiled ruling machine is now distracted by self-destructive internal conflicts. Many of its national and provincial leaders have joined or hope to join the Government; others seem intent on settling personal grievances and paying off old grudges. In the meanwhile, political opportunities are lost by default. Accustomed to and conditioned by three decades in power, Congress chieftains seem unable or unwilling to mount a concerted political counterattack on the Janata administration or to fill the role of responsible alternative to the Government. At the center of Congress and, indeed, of national controversy is the single most popular political

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figure in the land—former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Not now a member of Parliament, attacked as a political liability, and almost disowned by many of her own party, Mrs. Gandhi commands an immense personal following but a declining organizational base. The best-known and possibly most enigmatic figure on the subcontinent, Mrs. Gandhi still holds the key to Indian politics. She may not be able to win any future contest for power, but she has the ability to foil the ambitions of almost any other contender for high national office.

Few can remember Indira Gandhi without the trappings of power, either as the daughter and confidant of the great Jawaharlal Nehru or as a political force on her own. The absence of these accoutrements for perhaps the first time in her adult life does not detract from an impressive personality and the simple, direct, and clear way she articulates her thoughts. What would she have become if she had not been born into the Nehru family, if she had not been destined for political stardom from childhood? Her style and method suggest a senior executive, whose decisiveness and capacity for hard work would lead her to flourish in a large corporation; or a senior college professor better equipped for the lecture room than for research activities; or the head of some large social service enterprise, where composure under pressure is a valuable asset. Although Indira Gandhi, now nearing sixty, does not convey a robust presence or an aura of bustling dynamism, it is difficult to picture her as anything but an activist in a leadership position.

Although she is an activist, we begin with a discussion of philosophy in three dimensions—spiritual, personal, and political. Several years ago I had heard Mrs. Gandhi often express agnostic sentiments. Once, in 1971, she told a BBC interviewer: "I don't believe in God and have no Faith to turn to—I've never wanted a crutch." In more recent years I observed how the liberal rationalism and overt agnosticism of the younger Indira had given way to a more philosophic tone in speech, a more traditional approach in dress, a deeper sense of historic destiny tinged with occasional spiritual references. Was this a conscious evolution, an unconscious development, or was it the creation of my own imaginative projections?

No, it is not. Ten or fifteen years ago I had not read so much of these things. Since then I have reflected on this a great deal and realized what extraordinary wisdom was written thousands of years ago. Maybe we reinterpret ancient philosophy to suit the present times and see it in a way in which the founders would not recognize. But I have come to appreciate the permanence of these philosophic truths as I did not when I was younger. It may be age, but I do see things differently now. I don't look upon these as a crutch, but as a source of inspiration and guidance.

I remarked that her father, Prime Minister Nehru, also seemed to have had a similar spiritual evolution as he grew older. In agreeing, she wondered whether advancing years or a long period at the lonely pinnacle of national power produced this introspection.

Mrs. Gandhi has stated that her father was the most important influence in her life. She once described him as a saint in politics. Would she expand on this?

What I really meant was that he was not a politician in the sense that the word is understood in the West or, unfortunately, in our own country. For most of us who grew up in the freedom struggle, politics was not a career. It was not a job or a question of getting something for yourself. It was working, sacrificing, and struggling for your country. My father exemplified this. When I said he was a saint, I meant he was a very good man—a basically good man. Winston Churchill once said that he was a man who had conquered hatred and fear. He had no viciousness or spite in him.

What did she learn from her association with Jawaharlal Nehru?

He always felt that India came first; that one's personal life and interests must be subordinated to the national interest. And then I learned that real strength comes from inner strength—external resources may help you to attain things, but your inner resources are your real assets and this is what sustains you, if you have nothing else. It is what sustains me today.

Our conversation moved to personal philosophy, the values that guide an individual's behavior and thought processes. "Personal austerity and self-discipline are very important in our lifeways. Luxury has a very demoralizing effect." What about imposed discipline? I asked, mindful of the twenty-one months of emergency rule she had ordered from June, 1975, to March, 1977.

In the absence of self-discipline, some forms of imposed discipline are sometimes necessary. But they cannot last forever and ultimately have little value unless they serve to create self-discipline.

I also sensed a strong belief in the family as a fundamental unit of society, perhaps as a basic disciplinary training ground. Were these elements of Mahatma Gandhi’s influences?

Perhaps, but much of this comes from my own personal experience. When I was growing up, we did not have much of a family life; the freedom movement and the fight against colonialism absorbed all our time. I came to realize the importance of self-discipline and of the family.

An enduring impression, one that has continued to shape her own relationships. Three generations of her own family now live together and share their feelings and their meals each day. Silently, I reflected on her own
family experience: Here was a mother who had known a singularly lonely childhood, whose parents were public figures but hardly private presences. Despite her efforts to create an intimate family life, to prevent replication of her youth, official duties had claimed much of her attention when her two sons were children. They knew little of their father, Feroze Gandhi, also a prominent politician, who separated from Indira and died relatively early. In anyone sensitive to family values these experiences must cause mixed emotions, maybe even guilt.

Political philosophy is often a theoretical subject, but Indira Gandhi reduced it to three central commitments—to a concern for the poor, to moderated and liberal socialism, and to democracy. Were these merely abstractions, conceptual visions? How did they jibe with the reality of her politics?

"Garibi Hatao" (eliminate poverty) is not just a slogan; it's very much part of my beliefs. It was my election pledge in 1971. Unfortunately, a series of international and domestic events caused many setbacks and we could not fulfill this pledge. Maybe the problems of massive poverty cannot be solved completely or immediately, but the poor have to feel that an effort is being made to solve them. It gives them life some hope and meaning. In India, in recent years, we did not solve the problem of poverty, but the poor and deprived had begun to feel that we were tackling their problems. I can't say they were satisfied, but at least there was considerable progress. There was hope that we were going toward a better future and, in time, more and more problems would be solved, more opportunities would be available to them.

Socialism is a means toward this end. I pressed another question. Opponents of Mrs. Gandhi have suggested that she mouthed socialism while moving her economic policies away from the radical measures she initiated in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This is quite untrue, she countered. Her policies were adapted to reality, and the results, especially in the past two years, proved the validity of her strategy. Adaptations had to be made, but her broad commitment to liberal socialism as a philosophy and a program remains firm.

We discussed democracy. I had just completed a book entitled The Decline of Democracy. Its central thesis is that forms of liberal democracy as they have evolved in the Western world are unsuited to the Third World. This type of government might endure in the industrial nations, but it seems to have little validity for countries whose primary needs are rapid economic development and a drastic restructuring of society. Surprisingly—at least surprising to me—Mrs. Gandhi disagreed, contending that democracy was viable in the Third World, especially in a country such as India. I reminded her of the Declaration of Emergency in June, 1975, of the vast authoritarian powers accumulated under the Emergency, of the censorship of the press, and detention of political opponents. What about...
the alleged and real excesses of this period? Did this not seem inconsistent with her professions of democracy? How could this conviction be reconciled with actual happenings?

Indira Gandhi’s response was articulate and vehement. She began with an encapsulation of her own political career. In the thirty years of Indian nationhood she had campaigned in each of the seven national elections. She had run for elective office on four occasions. She had led the Congress party into three general elections, in 1967, 1971, and 1977. She had consistently advocated democracy and abided by its result—win or lose. She could have subverted the electoral process on many occasions, but she had resisted any such inclinations. The 1977 election was held democratically and the result was accepted as a democratic verdict. It is the only example in history of a government having such special powers, holding a democratic poll, and abiding by the result. She still is committed to democracy. Most of her eleven years as prime minister were conducted under the usual system of government, except for brief and localized special situations. The Emergency was enacted through parliamentary procedures and was modified to enable a democratic election to be conducted in March, 1977, although it could have been comfortably avoided or further deferred.

As soon as it was possible to do so, I called for elections. Many advised against it, but I felt that we had already postponed elections for a year and that we should seek a mandate. Taken as a whole, does this record reflect the actions of one who is opposed to democracy?

The Emergency, she said, had to be seen in the context of contemporary events. The deterioration of the national condition, accelerating prior to mid-1975, had brought India to the edge of disaster. In times of crisis, critical measures have to be taken. Most major nations at some time in their histories have had to resort to exceptional measures when their society and its existence were threatened. A similar situation prevailed in India. "The Emergency was never intended to be a permanent condition—it was a temporary corrective." In fact, to follow her reasoning, the Declaration of Emergency saved India from a cataclysmic fate. There is substantial agreement within India with this assessment, for economic deterioration and political disintegration had reached extraordinary levels at that time. But many subsequent opponents of the Emergency point to its excesses.

True, there were some excesses. There are excesses even now. Everything that is supposed to have happened under the Emergency is happening now, but does not have the legal sanction of a constitutionally enacted emergency. The excesses during the Emergency were not intentional or deliberate.

Reflecting on this sentiment, I concluded that Indira Gandhi was measuring the success or failure of her policies against her intentions; her opponents seem to use her mistakes as their yardstick. A more objective history will perhaps evaluate the Indira era against its results. While current perceptions focus on the short period of emergency power, this is only a small fraction of her long premiership. How does she see it as a whole?

It was one of the most difficult periods of modern history. Critical and often unfavorable developments affected the poorer nations, unprecedented readjustments were taking place in the international system. We were often struggling against these trends. I think that the eventual judgment will be that we did not do badly. In fact, by early 1977 India was poised for a major thrust forward. The economic situation was stabilized and we were mobilizing ourselves for the next stage of growth, something that would bring relief to the masses of poor people in our country. The momentum of this has now been stalled. The discipline we established during the Emergency is breaking down. We are backsliding, and the immense efforts and energies we invested will be wasted if we don't go forward with a sense of purpose. The present government is drifting, they have done nothing for the welfare of the people so far. India will not perish, but the task of rebuilding will be much more difficult now.

"Everything that is supposed to have happened under the Emergency is happening now..."  

The results of the March election in India have been subject to worldwide scrutiny. I asked Mrs. Gandhi for her analysis. The answers cited conventional reasons: propaganda about excesses, problems of a party in power for almost three decades, a united opposition, defections from her ranks by important supporters. And then she added two interesting factors: the annoyance of rural folk at the arrogance of petty bureaucracy and the disaffection of the petty bureaucracy from the government. Did this mean that Congress would otherwise have won? She was not sure; there was an antigovernmental trend that had developed between January and March. But the sense of exaggerated fear that was created in the countryside generated a resentment that was translated into votes against her.

What about her own personal defeat in the Rae Bareli constituency? "This was entirely my fault," she said, implying that her national campaign had diverted her attention from the local politics of that area. Her remark that the sweep in this province, indeed in the whole of North India, was so complete that it was almost unnatural, led me to a more personal interrogation. What were her reactions to the defeat? "A mixture of relief and disappointment. You see, I never wanted political power
or sought office for its own sake. Originally, it was thrust on me. I often thought of giving it up, but there was so much to be done—for the country, for the poor people." Pausing for a moment, she added, "And there still is."

Our next topic is the most discussed controversy in India today. I record the substance of our exchange:

Your son, Sanjay, has become the center of heated debate. He is not the center, he is the victim. So much has been said about him and so little, if anything, proven as yet. I am not interested in shielding anyone, and where there have been any allegations I have, myself, tried to find out whether there was any substance to them. So far I have found nothing to justify the vilifications so widely broadcast.

What influence did Sanjay have on you as prime minister?

Very little. I hardly ever discussed government matters with him. He was involved in the work of the Youth Congress, but not in governmental matters. In key matters I have always made my own decisions.

You must have heard of the rumor that on one occasion Sanjay slapped you and otherwise intimidated you. I have denied this before as being utterly false—fantastic nonsense. Nobody can prove this or produce any evidence to support this lie.

How did Sanjay get interested in politics?

He is not really politically oriented. He never was and is not now. He came in originally to be of help to me.

Do you feel that attacks on Sanjay are means of attacking you personally but indirectly?

To some extent this is so, but they are also directed against Sanjay because of concern that he may be an independent political success.

Is it correct that the policies Sanjay was advocating were officially approved Congress party policies?

That is correct.

When the Allahabad court held against you and you contemplated resignation in June, 1975, did Sanjay influence you to stay on and declare the Emergency?

This is not so. Sanjay had little to do with it. The chief ministers of the states were a critical factor—they were most insistant that I do not resign.

Was the Emergency declared to facilitate your decision not to resign?

Not at all. The decision on the Emergency was taken in the context of the overall condition of the country. It was unanimously supported by the Cabinet, by large segments of the people, and by a substantial majority in the Parliament. In a country of this size it would be impossible to have an emergency for long without wide public support.

Are your movements constricted at the present time?

I am followed wherever I go. They say that I cannot get a passport to travel abroad. I hardly get any mail. There is a kind of witch hunt going on at the moment.

There have been suggestions that your opponents will make every effort to put you in prison. How do you react to this? Do you think they will arrest you?

I'm sure of it. It is said that they are afraid of me. It is not something one likes, especially for the reasons they may cook up. Acts of political vengeance should have no place in our society.

True to this prediction, shortly after I saw her the Government arrested Mrs. Gandhi on October 3, 1977. Two charges of corruption while in office were alleged, but after a brief detention she was ordered released by court order, with the judge rebuking the Government for its inability to make a valid preliminary case. Indira immediately called this a politically motivated action and urged the nation to "be prepared to fight the very real threat to our country's self-reliance, without which we cannot successfully combat poverty or maintain our freedom." Widespread public protests attested to her continuing popularity, and the political consequences of this situation may well prove favorable to her. However, it is likely that government-sponsored efforts to restrict or discredit her will continue and will be fought in both judicial and political arenas in the months ahead.

Two situations currently preoccupy much of Indira Gandhi's attention: the state of the country and the state of her party. She sees three major problems facing the nation, each of them capable of causing major internal upheavals—economic deterioration fueled by falling production and rising inflation, especially in items affecting the poorest segment of the population; a rising crime rate and a breakdown of law and order; and increasing regional separatist tendencies that could endanger the Indian Union. In each of these areas she feels that her policies had accomplished much and that the Janata government has vitiated the progress made in recent years. A steady stream of visitors, many poor and deprived, passes through each day to reinforce her judgment and to urge her continued participation in public life.

The vehicle for a political comeback is uncertain, however, and she is now engaged in what is likely to be the most critical battle of her political career. The leadership of the Congress party is increasingly hostile to Indira, and she will have to win the party or quit it before she can rewin the nation. Political history tells us that leaders without organizations rarely make recoveries. But organizations without real leaders are equally impotent. Without outstanding national figures, riven with petty jealousies, the Congress hierarchy consists of mediocre oldtimers who combine to try and keep Indira
out. They spend most of their time in defensive maneuvering against her supporters, transferring all their shortcomings and failures to her, while conveniently forgetting that every one of them vigorously endorsed the Emergency and its consequences until they were defeated at the polls. I asked Indira about this: was it betrayal? She seemed reluctant to make any public pronouncement on intraparty affairs, except to say that "You cannot really change people. I have nothing to say about them. Wherever I am, I continue to work in my own way. If they want to keep away, let them." And then she added: "Ultimately, the people will be with me, as they were in 1969," a cryptic reference to an earlier occasion when her party split as she overcame opposition from its old guard.

What of her political future? "I am not interested in party politics as such. If you define politics as service to the people and to the nation, then I am very much in it." Recently, when asked about her return to political life, she responded: "When did I ever leave it?" After several months of limited public activity, confined largely to the environs of Delhi, Mrs. Gandhi is now stepping up her travel programs and national appearances. These forays evoke emotional crowds. "The poor people, who have been so misled and who continue to suffer, are with us," she says. Can she build another Indira wave? The prospect unnerves both those who contend for position in her own party and her opponents now in government. They fear her long memory and brisk recuperative capacities. The Janata coalition has initiated several judicial and other inquiries against her son and against her; they hope to find some way to tarnish her image and maybe even convict her of criminal abuse of power. Whether these moves will succeed is questionable; and if they do, they could create an aura of martyrdom in a country that venerates martyrs as few countries do.

The disappointments of the past few months must weigh heavily on Mrs. Gandhi.

There are many younger politicians whom I encouraged because they were bright and appeared to have promise. Some have proven extreme opportunists, others are intimidated into timidity by our loss.

Her rivals for leadership of the Congress party are men of little intellectual or national distinction; most of them prospered politically under her tutelage. Their public efforts to jostle her out of the party hierarchy and their plaintive approach to the present government must evoke her resentment, if not distaste. Other prominent allies have moved away. Does the Moscow-backed Communist party of India, another supporter-turned-critic, now figure in her political calculations? "Not very much." There is an air of cold detachment as she discusses these vicissitudes, but she must accept them as the political realities today. As another Asian premier, Sir John Kotelawala, had told me twenty years earlier, in the wake of his own crashing defeat in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka: "People are either at your feet or at your throat." I recounted this comment to Indira, and she nodded appreciatively.

**International affairs takes little of her time these days. However, she has strong ideas on the need for nations of the Third World to maintain their independence of superpower blocs. "Nonalignment is survival insurance," she says. "Dependence is a very unhealthy condition, and too many Third World nations are in this condition." Does she still believe, as she used to declare publicly, that clandestine agencies of the big powers (especially the CIA) interfere in the domestic politics of Third World nations? There is little doubt that she does, and recent United States congressional revelations harden these suspicions. Does she see the hand of external conspiracy joining with internal political trends to produce her defeat? Mrs. Gandhi refused to rule out this possibility. "Big powers like client states, and I refused to make India a supplicant or anybody's client." Yet she has a profound respect for the Western liberal tradition, an impulse shared with and probably inherited from her father.

Relations with the Soviet Union, which India expanded during the past six years, were, she says, based on necessity when the United States tilted so patently toward Pakistan, especially in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971. The Indo-Pakistan war had other implications. On May 12, 1977, former President Richard Nixon told interviewer David Frost of his knowledge that India had secret plans to attack Pakistan in 1971. Nixon said that "From a source that we consider to be totally reliable, we learned that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in a meeting of her cabinet, had directed that a military operation be put in place to attack West Pakistan and we had, as I said, information that we knew was completely reliable." What did Mrs. Gandhi think of this?

It's nonsense. We had no plans or intentions of attacking Pakistan. If anybody supplied this information, they did it for their own ends and American foreign policy was foolishly misguided by it.

A final question. "What qualities do you value most in a political leader?" I had half-expected a philosophic and diffused response of the kind Prime Minister Nehru had given me many years ago—morality, compassion, a broad worldview, a sense of justice, the ability to evoke consensus, an empathy with his or her followers. Indira Gandhi's answer encapsulates her personality and the characteristics that distinguish her:

The capacity to make firm decisions and take decisive action. Ultimately, real leadership means making decisions and accepting the responsibility for them.

It was night as I left Mrs. Gandhi's old but roomy residence at Willingdon Crescent. I felt that Indira Gandhi was a leader who knew what she wanted for India and for herself—and would some day have the power to get what she wanted.