



**Prison reform**  
 Gov. Wilson's adamant refusal to consider budget cuts for the state's prisons won't buy a safer California or a better prison system.

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San Jose Mercury News, May 26, 1991

# Perspective

## Can India avoid chaos?

Gandhi assassination compels nation to invent new approach

By Nirmal Mitra

**T**HOUSANDS of miles away from my home in India, I am nervous about what the brutal murder of Rajiv Gandhi might drive my countrymen to do.

As one who has witnessed and reported sectarian rioting for the past 13 years, I refuse to delude myself that we were ever a non-violent nation. Murder has become the language of political dissent in our Westminster-model parliamentary democracy. Mahatma Gandhi was felled by an assassin who meant to punish him for allowing the country to be divided; Indira Gandhi was cut down by her Sikh bodyguards for not allowing the country to be divided; and Rajiv Gandhi was blown apart for threatening to win an election that would probably prevent the country from being divided.

India's classic challenge has been to create a sense of unity in a bewildering diversity of cultures and communities. The British did this by imposing Eng-

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*Nirmal Mitra is a special correspondent for "Sunday," India's leading weekly magazine. He is currently enrolled in Stanford University's John S. Knight Fellowship program. He wrote this article for Perspective.*



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## Pacific overtures

The growing community of Pacific Islanders is intent on educating its youth and is making political inroads in East Palo Alto.

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*San Jose Mercury News, Sunday, May 26, 1991*

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**Analysis • Commentary • Editorials**

# Can India prevent slide into chaos?

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lish, offering liberal education and building an intricate railway network. After they left, the Congress Party ran the country for all but five years by trying to stitch together diverse interest groups in party and government.

Until recently, the country was convinced that it would be rudderless without one of the Gandhis in power. The Gandhis, who have ruled India for all but three years, had become a pill the country swallowed every five years for economic and political health and stability. The assassination deprived the country of the last credible adult in the family.

## India's options

Rajiv's inexperienced Italian wife, Sonia, has refused an offer to become president of the Congress Party. It was offered to her in the hope that she could steer the party to victory in the June 12-15 national election. Many believe all she needed to do to be elected was to be seen in a Hindu widow's clothes. But it might have backfired. Most people would have stopped to think why a nation of 800 million needed to elect a foreigner as party president. It would be stretching the dynasty principle too far.

This is why the assassination begins a new phase in our politics: It compels us to invent an alternative to the Congress Party and the Gandhis. We will have to abstain from the drug. But will we survive the withdrawal symptoms? Or will we merely switch from one drug to another — say, religion?

The verdict in the on-going national elections is certain to be confused. One round of polling was over before Rajiv's murder. The next two rounds will follow three weeks from now. In part, the results are likely to reflect a restatement of faith in the Congress, after months of unstable rule. But it in part will also mark a shift toward Hindu fundamentalism.

The vote will most likely result in an inconclusive mandate. If the Hindus score major gains, the vote will produce a stable fundamentalist Hindu government that will lose

small towns who see Hinduism as the only way to restore peace and profit.

The swing to the right began when Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister five years ago. The urban middle classes were disillusioned with the Congress Party. They were disappointed in his failed accords in Punjab and Sri Lanka and his failure to check terrorist violence and eventually began to doubt his honesty after he was rumored to have received huge kickbacks from an artillery deal with a Swedish firm, a yet unproven charge.

Throughout the period, the People's Party reached out from its base in the north to the Marxist-dominated states of the east and south. Its leader, L.K. Advani, was unsparing in his criticism of the Congress and its leaders, whom he described as dishonest and inefficient. The only exception he made was the Congress rebel defense minister, V.P. Singh, who was removed for daring to start an inquiry into the artillery deal.

Rajiv was voted out of power in 1989 and was replaced by Singh at the head of a minority government backed by the Hindu, who won a large number of seats. But once in power, Singh moved away from his broad middle-class base and took the side of the backward castes, a powerful rural force. During his brief spell as prime minister, he steamrolled an affirmative action plan to help the backward castes, infuriating the middle class voters and Hindu allies because it placed them at a severe disadvantage in jobs and college admissions. Later he came into confrontation with the Hindu People's Party over the mosque-temple dispute in Ayodhya, which led to the withdrawal of Hindu support from his weak coalition and brought about its collapse.

## Unity vote certain

When the people go to the polls in June, they are certain to vote for unity again. Only, without a true-blue Gandhi at its helm (and Sonia Gandhi cannot be counted as one), I do not see the panic trans-

economic and political health and stability. The assassination deprived the country of the last credible adult in the family.

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The vote will most likely result in an inconclusive mandate. If the Hindus score major gains, the vote will produce a stable fundamentalist Hindu government that will lose no time in putting down Muslims and Sikhs with the trishul (trident, the weapon of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction), do away with the country's secular credentials and convert it into a Hindu rashtra (state) with fascist attributes.

To members of the Indian middle class who are innocent of history, the last of these appear to be the most attractive choice in a time of uncertainty. I consider it horrific that it should be discussed at all, after what the world has seen.

India is 80 percent Hindu, 12 percent Muslim and 8 percent Sikh and other religions and has a powerful middle class of 150 million. The growing appeal of the Indian People's Party among the educated Hindu middle class is a sign of their conviction that only by asserting its Hindu identity can India hope to survive. This view has become as fashionable among the young, educated members of India's big cities as among traders in

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## Unity vote certain

When the people go to the polls in June, they are certain to vote for unity again. Only, without a true-blue Gandhi at its helm (and Sonia Gandhi cannot be counted as one), I do not see the panic translating into a victory for the Congress Party. Instead, it might go to the Hindu People's Party and its leader, Advani, a firm believer in a theocratic Hindu state.

■ The perils of a swing to the right notwithstanding, India's political system has a proven resilience to shocks and crises. Despite the fact that 55 percent of the country is illiterate, the electorate — which is more than twice the population of the United States — is extraordinarily mature.

The constitution has held the nation together. We may be a young nation at 43, but we have 5,000 years of recorded history and a political culture of our own. India is not a banana republic. The army is professional, steeped in British tradition. All parties place the country's unity and integrity uppermost. There is a consensus among them on most pressing national issues. And if driven to the wall, they would not hesitate to put their heads together to prevent a backslide into chaos. ■