

# Prime Minister Gandhi tells party: Lead movement to 'Build India'

by Ramtanu Maitra

The centennial anniversary of the Indian Congress Party in December in Bombay will be long remembered as the platform Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi chose to launch a sharp attack on the functioning of India's governing institutions, and a political movement to transform the country. Addressing a huge gathering as president of the Congress Party, an institution which has controlled India's political scene for decades, Prime Minister Gandhi accused the present Congress leaders of being "brokers of power and influence who dispense patronage to convert a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy," and "a set of self-perpetuating cliques, who thrive by invoking the slogans 'caste' and 'religion,' and by enmeshing the living body of the Congress in their net of avarice."

While the prime minister shocked Congress veterans—and the nation—by talking bluntly and straightforwardly, without taking recourse to the self-serving rhetoric for which such occasions are usually used in India, there are reasons to believe that the youth liked what they heard. What will catch their attention is that the prime minister counterposed the lassitude and hypocrisy that has come to characterize the Congress apparatus, to the unique and urgent responsibility of Congress members to lead a new movement, a movement to "Build India."

All accounts of the preparation for the Dec. 27-29 meeting in Bombay indicated that the three-day interlude was meant to be a happy occasion for Congress members from all across the country to gather and reminisce about the past hundred years of the organization's successes. About 100,000 Congress members did arrive in Bombay, from all over India, to commemorate the "good old days," but their merrymaking was short-lived. Prime Minister Gandhi's words, in the midst of the hoopla, brought them quickly back to the reality they did not want to face. To those who would have preferred to bask in the sunshine of the past, Rajiv Gandhi said: "As action has diverged from precept, the ideology of the Congress has acquired the status of an heirloom to be polished and brought out on special occasions." And the Congress organization, in the process, he added, has been reduced to "a shell from which the spirit of service and sacrifice has been emptied."

Prime Minister Gandhi's hard-hitting speech was not directed only toward the weaknesses of his Party's members. Since the Party has controlled the central government for 35

out of the 38 years of the post-independence era, to the Indian public the Congress Party is synonymous with the Indian government; it is difficult to focus on one without taking note of the other. Moreover, the Party's image before the public in distant parts of India fluctuates with the performance of the government in New Delhi. For this reason, Rajiv Gandhi, as head of the government, did not pull his punches against the bureaucrats who have taken over the administrative process—by default of the political leaders.

Mr. Gandhi chose his words carefully in describing the corruption and sloth that has become the hallmark of the Indian bureaucracy—"the fence which has started eating the crop," as he put it. "We have government servants who do not serve but oppress the poor and helpless, police who do not uphold the law but shield the guilty, tax collectors who do not collect taxes but connive with those who cheat the state, and a whole legion whose only concern is their private welfare at the cost of society," Rajiv Gandhi said. "They only have a grasping, mercenary outlook, devoid of competence, integrity, and commitment." It is clear that many would not appreciate the dismal picture that the prime minister painted, but there are hardly any who would deny the accusations.

During the last two decades, the Congress as a political party has lost its moorings. It has been reduced to a shell of its former self, as if its only purpose were to garner votes to win elections. The purpose and commitment of the Party—surely the only party in India which still enjoys a broad national base, from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat to Assam—have been reduced to a vague slogan of "Serving the People." Only a few leaders, among whom the late Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi stands out as unique, had from time to time provided new direction and vigor.

## The historical past

The hundred years of the Congress Party is a history of many great moments. It would be, however, wrong to assume that the idea of the Party had caught peoples' imagination from the outset. In 1885, only 28 years after the Indian independence movement spearheaded by Indian soldiers under British rule had been ruthlessly quashed by the colonialists, the first Congress session took place, on Dec. 28, in Bombay. Seventy-two delegates were present for the occasion. Among those heard was the voice of A. O. Hume, a

British civil servant representing the town of Simla, a hill town in northern India. The first Congress session was presided over by an Anglophile, W.C. Bonnerji. The resolutions passed in the session were petty, directed mainly at pleasing the gentry loyal to the British Raj. One resolution deprecated the annexation of Upper Burma by the British crown, and suggested instead that "the entire country of Burma be separated from the Indian Vice Royalty and constituted as a Crown Colony, as distinct in all matters from the government of this country as is Ceylon [now Sri Lanka]." Not a peep was heard about independence, and no one even spoke of self-rule.

It took 20 years before Bal Ganga Dhar Tilak, a fervent nationalist and an intellectual giant in his own right, threw open the Party to the masses with his clarion call: "*Swaraj* [Sanskrit for freedom] is our birthright." Although Congress moderates and other Party members influenced by the British Fabian Society and the Theosophical Society managed to push Tilak out of the Party leadership, the cat was out of the bag. Tilak's slogan, fortified by the blatant British oppression, had planted the seed of independence that finally bore fruit more than four decades later.

While credit for opening up the Congress Party rests squarely with Tilak, it was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a British-trained lawyer who learned politics in South Africa fighting for minority rights, who brought the Indian population into the political mainstream. One campaign after another, some more effective than others, not only politicized the population, but also developed leaders who later became the architects of modern India. During this period a plethora of leaders came to the fore—the list is extensive. To name but a few, one must include Jawaharlal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, Subhash Bose, J. B. Kripalani, Ballabhbhai Patel, C. R. Das, Motilal Nehru, C. Rajagopalachari, and Sarojini Naidu.

### **A new and difficult role**

Independence from British rule in 1947 propelled the Congress leadership into a new role, and a difficult one. While it was no doubt a trying task to awaken political awareness among 400 million people from colonial oppression, and to face the wrath of the British Raj, the task of providing food, clothing, and housing to the millions in a depleted economy, and of building the nation at the same time, was found to be even more demanding.

Whereas during the independence struggle a general consensus was easier to arrive at, in the new situation it was sometimes necessary to fight and win an election against former colleagues, in order to stay in power. Only a handful of leaders passed the test, but the mass movement began to turn into another political party with a will to win. Many compromises were made to stay in power, and the Party drifted into the hands of power brokers. In 1969, Mrs. Gandhi split the Party to shake off the excess fat and attempt to revive it. She had to do that again in 1978, soon after her defeat in the general elections following emergency rule.

Today it is clear that all is not well with the Congress Party. There are 9 states out of 22 in which the Congress does not enjoy a majority. Even in states where the Congress Party has won elections, it has done so partly because of the weakness of the opposition parties.

### **A clarion call**

Prime Minister Gandhi's speech in Bombay is a clear signal that he has drawn the battle lines anew. It is evident that the battle has to be fought and won. Rajiv Gandhi has promised that an intra-party election, which has not been held for almost a decade, will take place this spring. The prime minister has canceled his trip to Australia, in order to put his mind to the re-organization process. Measures have already been taken to shape up the taxation system, the banking system, the judiciary, the research and development apparatus, and India's domestic and international agencies.

More clean-ups are in the offing, and from what everyone heard in the prime minister's speech in Bombay, they are coming sooner rather than later.

The clean-up of the administration had started a year ago, following the Congress Party's victory in the last election. However, what was missing until now for the clean-up to succeed, was the launching of a political campaign that placed the nation's economic development at the center of the mobilization. Rajiv Gandhi's call to "Build India" is the campaign that many were looking for.

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