

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Nation gears for elections

The election bug has hit. Electoral equations are dictating personnel shifts, policy moves.

Election worries have begun to preoccupy the high command of India's ruling Congress (I) party, with parliamentary elections due by the end of the year.

One indication of this was the return to power of the tested politician-handler, R.K. Dhawan, the former chief assistant and confidant of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Dhawan was recalled from the oblivion into which he had been thrown in November 1984, following Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. He was grilled mercilessly by the Thakur-Natarajan Commission investigating Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, reports say, and stoically turned down lucrative offers to put the court "secrets" he knows into print in the past few years.

In the prime minister's office, Dhawan's role will be to quell the unseemly dissidence at the state level that is destroying the party leadership's credibility. His knowledge of all the major and semi-major congressmen—their strengths and weaknesses—will be put to use now.

As significant is the appointment of Gopi Arora, confidant of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and bureaucrat *par excellence*, as the new finance secretary, on the eve of the budget session of Parliament that opened Feb. 21. The professed admirer of Communist leader M.N. Roy will play a critical role in projecting the ruling party's economic achievements and plans.

At the recent All-India Congress Committee meeting, the party launched a program to alleviate poverty. The program, reportedly penned

by Arora, calls for a handout on the order of \$1.5 billion in the immediate period ahead. It is yet to be seen whether Arora's relocation was designed to facilitate implementation of the expensive program, which might otherwise face serious obstacles in light of the growing budget deficit.

Elsewhere, T.N. Seshan, another star bureaucrat and Rajiv man, has been moved to head the Cabinet Secretariat, an organization interfacing the prime minister's office and the ministries. Seshan is a no-nonsense individual, who came to head the Environmental Ministry from the Indian Space Research Organization, and was then given charge of the prime minister's security in the crisis that followed the October 1986 attempt on his life. A year ago, Seshan was moved to head the Defense Ministry.

These and other bureaucratic shuffles coincided with a reshuffling of state governors (who are appointed by the ruling party at the center), clearly oriented toward bolstering the party machine for the election.

Pro-Soviet standard bearer Nurul Hassan has been moved from the governor's mansion in Calcutta to the state of Orissa, where leftist Nandini Sathpathy, a spent force in Orissa and former Congress (I) dropout resuscitated some time ago to appease the socialist lobby, is once again making noises against incumbent Congress (I) Chief Minister J.B. Patnaik. Hassan, it is presumed, can be relied upon to keep a fellow socialist in line for the time being.

In a related move, a trustworthy agent of the "high command" has been

installed as governor in Bihar. It is expected that he will shore up Bihar Chief Minister Bhagwat Jha Azad, who has been under siege by the dissident faction of the Congress (I) for months, at least through the election. Most likely, the dissidents have been promised power if they can deliver the state in the election.

This leaves only Rajasthan and Gujarat, two other Congress-ruled northern states where the dissident game has paralyzed the party.

Whether the old formulas for party management and electioneering will work or not, is another matter. A recent opinion poll, puffed in the Western media, which gave the Congress (I) 274 out of 540 parliamentary seats, a bare absolute majority, against a divided opposition, and only 203 against a united opposition, is more than anything a reflection of the abysmal state of the party machine at the grass roots level. The same poll showed Prime Minister Gandhi's popularity rising.

The dynamics were clear in the recent Tamil Nadu assembly election campaign, where Rajiv's numerous appearances did not fail to draw impressive crowds. That the prime minister's crowd-pulling is on his own account, however, became evident when Congress (I) could bag only 11% of the assembly seats.

The "high command" has apparently realized that Rajiv Gandhi's personal credibility is not enough to make up for the depths to which the party organization's credibility has plummeted over the years. Whether the combination of Rajiv's appeal and deft management of the party barons will be sufficient to keep Congress (I) securely in power depends in part on the absence of a credible alternative. At this writing, there is no more evidence of opposition viability than there ever was.