

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### **Election 1984: a mandate for Rajiv**

*With less than a week to the election, the outcome is a foregone conclusion.*

**T**here's not much of a market for bookmakers or astrologers as far as the Dec. 24 elections here are concerned. There is no doubt at this writing, several weeks into the month-long campaign, that the ruling Congress-I will swamp its fragmented opposition and that the 40-year-old prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, will get a powerful mandate from a large electoral majority to form his own government and get on with the business to which he has pledged himself, moving India into the 21st century.

By all previous standards, this election campaign has been quiet. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the election is taking place less than two months after the brutal assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. But the "sympathy wave" phenomenon some pundits postulated to pre-discount a Congress-I victory does not at all capture what is actually occurring in the electorate.

The shock and trauma of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination has provoked a new thoughtfulness and seriousness in the population. While there is no doubt that the voters have great sympathy for Rajiv Gandhi, pressed as he was into one of the world's most challenging jobs under numbing personal circumstances, the population's spirit and behavior during the election period is being guided by the fact that they are thinking positively about the country and its future.

In rural India, the post-Independence

era brought a significant improvement in living conditions. To India's 550 million villagers—more than 80% of the electorate—Mrs. Gandhi, daughter of the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was more than prime minister. She symbolized the stability and continuity of the nation and continuation of the leadership commitment to this slow but steady improvement in their lot. Young though he may be, Rajiv Gandhi preserves this continuity in the eyes of rural India.

The urban population, a distinct minority in India, is embracing Rajiv Gandhi from a different perspective. They had become increasingly impatient over the years because of what they considered to be the administration's failure to achieve the maximum economic growth. They blamed government acquiescence for the buildup of a massive and inefficient bureaucracy, moral and financial corruption, and the lack of vigor among the veteran campaigners. To them, Rajiv Gandhi represents fresh ideas and the determination to root out incompetence and corruption.

In intensive campaigning that has taken him up and down the country from morning until late at night day after day, Rajiv Gandhi has addressed the issues of national unity and economic development directly and simply. "The real question is," he repeats, "are we going to vote for one India or not?"

A lot has been done, he says, to ease the problems of the farmers, women and minorities, and weaker sections of the society. A solid foundation has been laid for the country, and now is the time to develop the nation's structure upon it.

The fact that the issues are large and clear has left the opposition mish-mash looking sillier than ever. Opposition leaders, motivated solely by the quest for individual power, are without plans or even the hint of a program that they care to articulate for the country. Most of them are oriented to some particular religious or racial sect or caste; they can mount no effective campaign on a national level because they do not believe in the nation. The exceptions are the two communist parties, but they also do not believe in the nation.

Rajiv Gandhi has pointed to the convergence of opportunism and outright anti-national activity in their behavior. He has challenged the opposition's support for the separatist principles of the Akali Dal, the Sikh political party.

It is clear that those who manage to get elected will do so only because of the personal influence they wield in a particular local constituency, or because the ruling party's candidate happens to be weak, or because vote splitting rebounds in their favor.

The irresponsibility of the opposition is epitomized in the campaign of Mrs. Maneka Gandhi, who is basing her campaign on a kind of pulp-novel invective against her electoral opponent and estranged brother-in-law, to which neither he nor the Congress stoops to reply.

As Rajiv Gandhi emphasizes about his opponents: "They can't even form a constructive opposition, how could they possibly run the nation?"