

Mainstream

VOL XVIII NO 44

SATURDAY

JUNE 28, 1980

90p

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

After the Crash

THE stunning bereavement suffered by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on the tragic death of her second son in a reckless air crash on June 23 has forced fresh complications into the Indian situation, adding a new dimension to the prevailing uncertainties.

Whatever opinion one may hold about Sanjay Gandhi's public activities in the last decade, the fact of the matter is that he was groomed by Indira Gandhi to take over from her the reins of power, and the public was left in no doubt about it. At the time of his death, he was in virtual command of the affairs of the ruling party; while he exercised not-so-remote control over a large arena of governmental affairs for which he had no formal responsibility. In the last one year, particularly after her return to power in January, Indira Gandhi let it be known that in her decision-making sanctum, she took Sanjay alone into confidence to the exclusion of all her political colleagues or official aides.

Whether one liked this state of affairs or not, whether or not this was wholesome for the functioning of a body politic that claims to be wedded to democracy, one can hardly escape from the prevailing reality that in the latest phase of her political

career, roughly covering the last five years Indira Gandhi relied preponderantly on Sanjay's judgement, no matter whether he was any more qualified to help in manning the ship of state than to pilot the ill-fated aircraft that ended in the terrible tragedy taking a toll of two lives, his own and that of his companion on the doomed flight Subhash Saxena.

Now that death has taken away from Indira Gandhi her very beloved son and successor in public life, the question that will be uppermost in the minds of all sections of opinion at home and abroad, will be what sort of political structure Indira Gandhi is going to set up. In her style of functioning so far, she has as a rule chosen one set of advisers or another and after a succession of two well-demarcated groups in different periods of her Prime Ministership, the latest phase beginning with the imposition of Emergency in 1975 saw her reliance on Sanjay, more evident with every passing year — and with Sanjay came his brand of politicians and businessmen, to the detriment of others on whom Indira Gandhi had counted in the past. It is to be noted that Indira Gandhi's functioning in this respect is very different from that of her great father who

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never relied on aides but only took counsel of colleagues, mostly fellow-fighters in the freedom struggle, whenever he thought fit. She believes in having confidants: in the final round, it was Sanjay who was marked out also to be her successor.

Many questions arise in this connection; perhaps most of them are no more than speculative. Minus Sanjay, would Indira Gandhi choose to confine herself, in the matter of taking counsel, to the band of Sanjay lieutenants who go by the nomenclature, however incorrectly, as the youth power of the Congress-I? Or, would she turn to some or many of her old colleagues and aides who had to stay away because of the primacy of Sanjay with his intolerance of those who would not toe his line? In still larger terms, would Indira Gandhi cast her net wider and bring together a consensus team to help her steer the nation out of the shoals and reefs among which it is getting stranded? Most of the crisis items that face this country today can hardly be solved by the fiat of a single party even if it is dominated by a nationally-acclaimed personality.

One of the consequences of Sanjay Gandhi's tragic demise would be its fallout on the Congress-I itself. Here is a ruling party which, by statistical data, stands out as virtually the single national party in the country. If anything, the recent election results have further confirmed this impression. If however one examines its structure and composition, there is no gainsaying the fact that it was recently being rebuilt around Sanjay and those in whom he put his trust, to the conspicuous exclusion of practically all the rest. Long gone are the days when the Congress was the platform of many opinions and loyalties, bound together by shared allegiance to certain political objectives of the past or its commitment to programmatic activity in the future. Personal loyalty has led to a pattern of personalised politics never seen before in this country.

Now that the key personality is no longer there, the personality who got his political sustenance from his mother who commands the confidence of millions, the Congress-I units in different States will no longer be under the discipline of personal loyalty to Sanjay Gandhi. Inevitably, they all face the danger of their unity being broken by the pressure of factions which

can hardly be brought to book: the fear of being excommunicated by Sanjay, son of the Prime Minister herself, is no longer there. And those who have got into vantage points in the party or in the State Ministries by the grace of Sanjay, will have to reckon with the assertion of dissidence, if not actual revolt, by the factions ranged against them. Indira Gandhi, with all the cares of office and her stamina strained to the breaking point by the personal loss of the son on whom she had come to rely so much, will not be physically in a position to intervene and settle such disputes. The upshot of it all is that the Congress-I is faced with the dismal prospect of dissension breaking out in its ranks, and this process threatening the tenure of the newly-formed Ministries in different States.

The political significance of Sanjay Gandhi's sad and sudden end cannot therefore be under-estimated. In fact, this situation, interwoven with tragedy, brings home to all of us the fragility of our democratic system, particularly as it has grown lately. This could be seen not only in the cascade of hypocritical hyperboles indulged in even by those who were posing only the day before as great upholders of democratic values, but in many small though significant events as well. The decision to hold Sanjay's cremation ceremony at Shantivan—taken no doubt with poignant remembrance of his grandfather—runs counter to the principle that made it a pilgrimage to the memory of the architect of independent India, having nothing to do with his being the head of a family, however distinguished in our national life: must we have an Escorial? While the official spokesman rightly clarified that Sanjay's funeral was a private affair, it was odd to find the three service chiefs paying their personal respect to the departed in the form of official salutes at the funeral. The spontaneous welling up of emotions in sharing the sorrow that Indira Gandhi has borne with rare fortitude must not be allowed to be confused with the norms of functioning of the machinery of state. Similarly, as one feels in all its poignancy the loss that confronts Sanjay's young widow Maneka today, one must not forget the cruel loss that has come in the way of Usha, the young widow of Subhash Saxena. With it all, the strange decision not to proceed with the court of enquiry into the air-crash but hold a routine departmental probe instead, is bound to give rise to unwholesome rumours apart from the public misgiving that important details about the tragic flight might be held back from it.

If there is any lesson that one can draw from the tragedy that faces the Prime Minister today, it is that the compulsions of political life in a democracy, so rich in its splendour as ours, demand the abjuration of personalised functioning. We have to seek out and set up new and rigorous standards of democratic functioning which can ward off a thousand storms, unencumbered by personal considerations.