

# EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

with Dale Posgate on the Indian elections

Two weeks ago, the 30 year reign of the Congress Party in India, led by Indira Gandhi, was abruptly ended, as India's 200-million voters swept into office a heterogeneous coalition of anti-Congress forces called the Janata Party.

Until Janata's election, the Congress had been the only party to hold office in India since independence in 1947.

Janata rode to victory on the crest of a wave of mounting opposition to the state of emergency Gandhi had clamped on India, curtailing many civil liberties, censoring the press, and throwing many prominent opposition figures into jail.

Dale Posgate, a professor of Political Science at York, analyzes the results and what they might mean for India's future. Posgate, has followed the Indian situation closely for many years, writing several articles on the country. He has visited the country many times, most recently in 1975.

By PAUL KELLOGG

**EXCALIBUR — What exactly is the Janata party, the recent victors in the Indian elections?**

**POSGATE —** It's very largely made up of people who were Congressmen at one time or another. Desai (leader of Janata) is an old-time Congress worker who was very close to Nehru (Indira's father) during the independence movement. He's only been officially out of Congress since the sixties and was in line for the job of Prime Minister when Nehru died in 1964.

Shastri came into power in 1964 and he died sixteen months later in 1966. It was then that Indira Gandhi was chosen but Desai was the frontrunner both times.

Then he came out of Congress in 1969 officially when the Congress Party split in two very much over an attempt to oust Indira Gandhi from the job. Desai was one of the people behind that attempt. He went into a party called the Congress Opposition which was made up of people, older congress leaders many of them with very strong regional bases of power. The leadership was called the Syndicate and he was part of that. He's not a stranger to Congress. He is really a Congressman, by training and upbringing and outlook.

**EXCALIBUR — There are other political forces though in the Janata.**

**POSGATE —** Another major party in the Janata is the Jan Sangh, which has been a separate party ever since the fifties. You could call it a Hindu Nationalist Party. It's based in northern India and has very much sprung up from anti-Moslem elements after partition. It advocates Hindi as the national language. It advocates a less secular kind of regime. In other words it wants a regime that recognizes Hindu law.

Economically it fluctuates, it's not really right wing, but socially it's more conservative than the Congress has been. That's a major party and its leader is now in the cabinet.

The really driving force behind it was a kind of populist protest movement that began in 1973 and reached its height in 1974. That was led by J.P. Narayan who is a very prominent Gandhian leader. He has not been active in politics since the early fifties but in 1974 came out of retirement and led in a rather indirect way, which is a Gandhian technique, a mass protest movement, led by students actually in two states. One was in Bihar which is Narayan's home state and another one in Gujerat which in fact is Desai's home territory.

It was a protest against Congress corruption and rising prices which were very bad in 1973-4, against the complacency of Congress, a general sense that things had become stale and it was time for change and improvement. It caught on in quite a big way and was an extra-parliamentary opposition. It relied on street demonstrations, sort of sitting in, locking in, if you like, the state legislators so they couldn't get in and out of their assembly building. He used Gandhian techniques, in other words, not the standard ones. It created enough chaos in Gujerat that

state government was finally brought down and in Bihar it caused very serious disruptions. They had to bring the army in J.P. himself got hit on the head by the army during one of the demonstrations.

That was the kind of unrest that Indira Gandhian claimed was bringing down Indian democracy and was a threat to its survival and that's why the emergency was necessary. But J. P. Naryan's movement collected a whole lot of opposition parties; socialist, Jan Sangh, some parties which are actually based in ex-Congress factions. Anyway, anyone who is in the opposition saw this as a pretty good bandwagon to get on to bring down the Congress.

And it did quite well, it really created some disturbances in 1974. J.P. Narayan is very much a force in that new party, as a guiding figure. As you know, he's been in jail since the emergency started. He's been extremely ill, on dialysis from failed kidneys. He is one of those paradoxical figures of Indian politics who combines saintliness and very hard-headed political activity. He would never accept any office. That's part of the Gandhian way. He'd do it from the outside. He is not in the cabinet and has no official standing at all.

**EXCALIBUR — It's hard to characterize the Janata Party as either left or right.**

**POSGATE —** No, you can't characterize it. The socialists are in there too. That's another organized element although the Indian socialist parties, the non-communist left in India is pretty weak, with the exception of pockets of industrial workers where the socialist trade unions are strong.

They're pretty weak but they're in there. So you can't characterize it as left or right. It's very much like Congress, it's everything. It's a collection of leaders who have caste followings, who have regional followings, who really will not come out with any clear-cut ideologies on economic issues. The sole thing binding them together is opposition to Indira Gandhi, not even opposition to Congress, but opposition to Indira Gandhi. Whether that's going to be enough to keep them together once they have to run the store is debatable.

**EXCALIBUR — So it sounds very much like it was the state of emergency Gandhi declared which gave the Janata Party such an overwhelming victory.**

**POSGATE —** Yes, that's true, in several respects. First of all, it came down very heavily on the intelligentsia, the middle class, the political activists, people who read newspapers and didn't like them being censored. And it also came down very heavily on a lot of Congress people. The emergency hit very hard at elements within the Congress Party that were opposed to Indira Gandhi and they were thrown in jail. That means the grass-roots organizers and opinion-makers were against her, and they helped organize the opposition.

It hit the villager — people often wonder about that, what difference does it make to a villager whether or not he's got habeus corpus and that kind of thing — it's pretty irrelevant. It hit the villager because it gave free rein to local officials, especially police. It meant the protection the villager has had, through politics, — in the sense of going to his MLA or going to his MP with his complaints, of using the political machine as a lever against the bureaucracy. When the bureaucracy was doing him in, collecting too much land taxes, coercing him, whatever, they could complain via the political machine — that disappeared, you see, because the political machines were essentially closed down. So I think that's where it hit the villager.

This sterilization business was a factor in the north. It's difficult to know how many people actually got forcibly sterilized but the psychology of it was very much a factor. The rumours are enough to do it. They hear that in village 'X' people got sterilized. They don't know anyone who got sterilized but nonetheless they get angry at it. So that's a factor.

A major factor was Indira bringing her son Sanjay into power. Sanjay threatened the electoral machinery of Congress. In other



If you've got the choice between non-benevolent autocracy and non-benevolent democracy, you may as well go for the democracy.

words, he came up not through the ranks, not through winning votes, not through building himself a power base but more or less from the top. His rise threatened the kind of machinery that Congress has always been based on, which is very effective mobilization of votes on various grounds. So, all that machinery had the feeling that they were being closed down and circumvented by Sanjay. So they wouldn't work for her, you see. The machinery that always won Congress votes wasn't working for her this time. That's a major handicap.

**EXCALIBUR — Why did Gandhi call the election? What forced her?**

**POSGATE —** A lot of people would like to know that. Well there's one hypothesis that she was the victim of poor information. That because she was no longer listening to her local electoral types, she was getting her information from her central intelligence agencies, and they didn't really know, so she made a bad judgement. Obviously, a factor would be to legitimize her emergency, to give that some basis of legitimacy so she could continue, but God knows.

**EXCALIBUR — Now that the Congress Party's gone and the emergency's gone and the Janata Party's in power, what are the issues and the problems they must tackle in India?**

**POSGATE —** The same ones they've always had to tackle. They haven't changed at all. They're pretty good economically right now, they've had two years of good crops, there is food in reserve. They're not in need of food aid. The winter crop that's just coming off now has fallen short of expectations but it's still adequate, so there's not going to be any kind of major economic disaster for the next couple of crop years.

But the problem is very real. The food is badly distributed. There's enough food around but a lot of people don't have access to it. They don't have the money to buy it. The new party talks about being much more rural in its orientation, more populist, more concerned with rural life, rural regeneration

and less concerned with major industrial projects. That is very much what's needed. Whether the new party will in fact do it remains to be seen. That kind of shift in emphasis is possibly a useful one. What you're not going to get is any kind of major structural change. The people who control India in the countryside, the stronger peasants with quite a lot of land, the moneylenders, higher castes, landlords, whatever you want to call them, are not about to be removed. In fact, there are some elements in the new cabinet very much in cahoots with these people. So there's not going to be any structural change. Big business has received a bit of a blow in the sense that it always supported Congress very closely, but big business will support whoever they need to support and they're not about to be dismantled either. There's not going to be any big shift in structure. They haven't proposed any major solutions to India's problems. They're barely organized, they barely know where to go to find their offices at this stage.

**EXCALIBUR — What kind of structural changes would be needed to begin to solve some of these problems?**

**POSGATE —** I suppose if anyone knows, they would do it. The fundamental problem is that forty per cent of the population does not have enough food, or enough income to shelter itself. The structural change is some mode of redistribution. Whether that can be done in an open democratic system is open to question. Can you bring in land reform in a voluntary sort of way. Certainly changes in land tenure, protection of the weak, protection of people who do not have steady incomes, landless labourers, some kind of movement of wealth into the countryside so there are jobs and income in the countryside. It's fairly clear what's needed, it's very unclear as to how to go about it.

A lot of people in fact would argue that the problem can't be solved with the current system. It needs to be completely dismantled and started again. But you can't write it off.