

The Rajiv I Knew

The Rajiv I Knew

And Why He Was India's Most
Misunderstood Prime Minister

Mani Shankar Aiyar

 juggernaut

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Dedicated to my three lionesses:

Suranya, a Gandhian in thought, values and action, who has found amazingly creative ways of bringing Gandhiji's 'My life is my message' to contemporary audiences to show that the Mahatma is as relevant to the India of the twenty-first century as he was to the twentieth. And who, besides, has brought comfort and succour to hundreds of immigrant families, Indian and East European, whose children have been filched from their parents by Western child protection services on the most trivial and culturally biased grounds, for which work she had been made a Laureate of the Nordic Human Rights Council. She is an activist who is often in demonstrations and has even undertaken long fasts to bring injustice to the attention of cruel, uncaring authorities. In fulfillment of Wordsworth's famous lines, she has proved that 'the child is father of the man'.

Yamini, a monument to courage and daring, who was pole-vaulted at the tender age of thirty-eight to preside over one of India's leading think tanks for her astonishing intellectual and administrative abilities, and her work as a columnist of note. With determination and persistence, she has faced persecution aimed at her institution and her personally, but refuses to be cowed down or give up on her principles, or bend her knees before insolent might. An authority on my subject of Panchayati Raj, I have learnt more from her than she ever learnt from me.

Sana, a professor of history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at Cambridge, US, to whom I invariably turn when bewildered by some turn of events, especially those of the past, that I don't completely comprehend. Strange as it may sound, I would describe her as my mentor, despite the forty years that separate us, for her reasoning is clear, her knowledge is deep and her analytical powers are profound. My pride in her is as great as my gratitude for leading me out of many a mental trap.

This book was initially an integral part of the first volume of my Memoirs. However, as I was not personally witness to, or personally involved with, much of Rajiv Gandhi's thoughts and actions in the political field, it read more like a political biography than an autobiography, especially as a great deal of the source material for this volume emerged in the public domain after his assassination on 21 May 1991, in some key cases a decade or even longer after his death. This meant the mode of my Memoirs suddenly changed from 'autobiographical' to 'biographical', which my publishers felt - and I agreed with them - wrecked the integrity and consistency of the work. It was, therefore, decided, with my concurrence, that these pages should be separated from the first volume and, after due editing, published as a separate standalone work.

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A note on the QR codes

For each chapter a QR code is given that may be scanned to access detailed footnotes and endnotes.

Introduction

As we were moving on the tarmac to board an Indian Airlines flight in January 1990, soon after his electoral defeat, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi suddenly turned to me and said, ‘People say I am arrogant. Am I?’

I replied, ‘Well, you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, sir. And you turned it into gold. Perhaps they don’t like that.’

RG never brought up the subject again. I wondered why he had asked. And was he asking me – or just posing the question to himself? He had just lost the election, crashing from over 400 seats to under 200, the biggest defeat in Indian electoral history – after winning by the highest margin ever five years earlier. It had put him in an introspective mood. Where had he gone wrong?

I seek an answer three decades on. It eludes me. But the journey makes me reflect on who he was and how he came to be PM. For although he was the eldest son in India’s first political family, with a mother and a grandfather both prime ministers who between them ruled the country for thirty-five years, he himself had so avoided the limelight that when his grandfather came to school to meet him, he simply could not be found anywhere. Until a schoolmate blew the whistle on him, suggesting he might be hiding in one of the large laundry wicker baskets placed in the bathrooms. And, sure enough, it was there that he was found, hiding from public view.

Later, when he was a pilot with Indian Airlines, he always said, 'This is Captain Rajiv speaking from the flight deck', never 'Captain Rajiv *Gandhi*' – partly because he did not want to be mobbed, but mainly because he shied away from public recognition. He had no intention, no desire, no wish to become prime minister himself. And he never would have had his brother, Sanjay, who was avidly grooming himself to take over from his mother, not been killed in a self-inflicted accident performing aerial acrobatics while piloting an aircraft. That was when 'Mummy' asked Rajiv to help her. He was reluctant but answered his mother's insistent pleas.

Little did he imagine that just four years down, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would be assassinated by her own bodyguards and the party apparatchiks would turn to him, wholly unprepared and just forty years of age, to take over the reins. His wife Sonia says she begged him not to, pointing out they would be killed. Rajiv replied that, in any case, they would all be killed, and stepped forward.

But once in office, he showed little hesitation in rising to his duties. These were immediately overshadowed with the outbreak of mass rioting targeting innocent Sikhs, at least 3,000 of whom were to lose their lives in an orgy of violence not seen since the Partition riots. RG had his mother's most trusted minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, as his home minister, and in P.G. Gawai, a former Union Home Secretary, a senior, well-respected lieutenant governor of the union territory of Delhi, both of whom he trusted. He thought he might leave the control of the pogrom in their tried-and-trusted hands but discovered within a day that they were not equal to the situation. It was the first and most telling example of misplaced trust that was to play havoc with his innings as PM. Eventually, taking the full responsibility upon himself, he called in the army and went personally in the dead of the night to the worst-affected areas. Calm began to be restored from the next day. It was a bloody bleeding.

But he did not sack the additional commissioner of police, New Delhi Range – to whom he was related. That would have rescued his personal

reputation but would have failed the test of due process. It was the first example of his scrupulous adherence to the principle of no punishment until the enquiry was over and the person indicted had been given the opportunity to clear his or her name, a commendable principle in private life but often misplaced for a head of government who has to act in the heat of the moment when public opinion is most exercised. It happened again with another relative, Arun Nehru, over the opening of the locks at the Babri Masjid and the Bofors deal; with other friends like Arun Singh; with party colleagues like V.P. Singh and Arif Mohammed Khan; and with officers like General Sundarji, and even RG's closest aide Gopi Arora, who crossed red lines of armed forces and civil service discipline. That harmed them but harmed the prime minister more – and all because he trusted them to the point where they thought they could substitute for him. Rajiv Gandhi's insistence on giving others a fair opportunity to explain themselves (commendable in private persons but often unsuited to those in public office) caused him and his office huge damage. That was the central paradox. What made him a good man – compassionate, diligent, honest, upright, unruffled, bold, truthful – was what felled him as PM. He lacked the guile, deviousness and deceit which may have helped him become a more long-lasting PM.

I had included all this – at somewhat inordinate length – in the first draft of my memoirs, but my arguments and conclusions were based not on personal knowledge but on an earnest pursuit of the record decades after the events. This gave the exercise the air of political biography as against personal reminiscences around which the rest of my memoirs were woven. My publisher, Chiki Sarkar, felt this did not sit well with the tone or theme of my memoirs. I, on the other hand, believe that what makes my life a possible matter of public interest is my six-year association with Rajiv Gandhi. To remove these reflections on what made him India's most misunderstood prime minister would, I felt, mean a disservice to the central catalytic relationship in my public life. I also felt

that I should stand up for him and be counted rather than pretend all was hunky-dory during those turbulent times. Chiki and I compromised by removing these pages from the autobiography (with brief mentions or some discussion of the incidents) and publishing these reflections sequentially as a separate, self-contained companion volume. That is how this book came to be.

While all these contretemps were swirling around the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), we, as civil servants working there, were placed in watertight compartments of sectoral responsibility and kept so busy with workdays that stretched from sixteen to eighteen hours that there was little opportunity – beyond snatched moments of gossip – to discuss them among ourselves. Besides, RG himself kept such a cheerful mien and concentrated with such diligence on the task at hand that newspaper headlines were soon forgotten in the whirl of office work under the benign, ever-smiling aegis of the unfazed and spirited prime minister. Moreover, RG held the lines of work responsibility firmly in place – and woe to him or her who attempted to cross into zones not their own. I was definitely not the PM's confidant on matters political, and apart from passing comments he made and occasionally overhearing his conversations with others, I had little opportunity of discussing these burning issues with him. I was in no sense an 'insider'. I, therefore, knew only as much as any newspaper reader about almost all that is recounted in these pages – and possibly even less because my duties kept me too preoccupied to give more than a cursory glance to the news of the day.

It is only the archival genius of my principal private secretary for thirty years, N. Venkatraman, and the prolonged lockdown over COVID-19 that gave me the opportunity of revisiting the Rajiv Gandhi accords and controversies and filling out my memory of his numerous innovative initiatives, domestic and foreign. I have used all this to bring perspective to events that played out to their conclusion, especially in the courts, decades after Rajiv Gandhi's death. The judgments on highly controversial

issues, in particular – such as the Shah Bano and Bofors cases – confirm that Rajiv Gandhi was right. The Supreme Court judgment of 2001 on the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, passed by the RG government following the Supreme Court’s 1985 judgment on the Shah Bano maintenance case, ruled that – far from ‘reversing’ the 1985 judgment, as is often maliciously claimed even today – Rajiv Gandhi was entirely right in codifying that judgment into the civil law of the country. And, on the so-called Bofors ‘scandal’, the Delhi High Court in 2004 found not ‘a scintilla of evidence’¹ had been unearthed after over 4,000 days of investigation, and the investigation by CBI of all relevant papers from Swiss and Swedish sources, to suggest RG was anything other than totally innocent. In 2018, the Supreme Court in effect endorsed the Delhi High Court finding. Yet, judgments on neither of these issues have adequately entered public and media consciousness, so that even today, some twenty years on, misunderstanding and worse continue to be propagated.

This is what made it imperative, in my considered view, to write at length about these still contested issues where others may want to let sleeping dogs lie. My conscience tells me otherwise.

The question that remains after delving into all these issues is why Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister appears so often to not have been in control of what was happening around him and in his name. For instance, how could he not have known that the Congress government in Uttar Pradesh (UP) was leaning on the judiciary to allow the locks to be opened at the Babri Masjid? How could the defence ministry and the chief of army staff have kept him in the dark about their not cooling down Operation Brasstacks despite stringent orders to do so? How could the PM not have known that AE Services had been recruited to fill the gap after the prime minister-level agreement with the Swedish

¹ Kartongen Kemi Och Forvaltning AB . . . vs State Through CBI on 4 February, 2004, Indian Kanoon, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/561739/?type=print>.

prime minister not to permit any middlemen in the Bofors deal? Why was the prime minister so woefully misled by all the agencies – army, intelligence, diplomatic – about the downside of accepting Sri Lankan President Jayawardene’s request to send in the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) to the north and east of Sri Lanka? Was his presentation to the United Nations (UN) of his Action Plan for a Nuclear-Weapons-Free and Non-violent World Order a trick played on the international community to keep their eyes off India’s nuclear weapons programme which was given its initial go-ahead by the same PM? These and other questions are answered in the pages that follow but the basic question of whether Rajiv Gandhi was really in charge deserves an answer right at the start. So, here goes.

Prime ministers can either be suspicious, secretive, even paranoid, like RG’s mother was, or transparent and trusting as he was. Even as he would have never betrayed a benefactor, he assumed that others shared his values. Not being duplicitous himself, he did not understand that others might betray him for a host of reasons. Not having striven for power, he did not quite understand what made others power-hungry. Because he trusted those to whom he gave responsibility, he assumed they would not violate his trust. Because he was a good man, he thought others would be the same. Until they gave him cause to remove his trust. Then he acted swiftly. And decisively.

Perhaps the biggest betrayal was by the man who made him PM, his cousin Arun Nehru. So firm was Arun Nehru’s hold on the party that Rajiv Gandhi initially outsourced much of his authority as party president to his cousin. This cousin was a different person altogether. He had no time for scruples and wielded power to impose his will on others. He got the relatively obscure Veer Bahadur Singh elected chief minister of UP with the aim of using him to gain firm control of Hindu sentiment over Ram Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid – an issue that in 1985 was entirely local (the unlocking of the gates at the Babri Masjid) but had the potential to

become a partisan national issue, garnering the support of large swathes of the majority community even as it alienated the Muslim minority. Arun Nehru also knew that RG would never play the game this way as he was quintessentially secular and believed deeply in the fundamental principle of unity in diversity to keep the nation together. Moreover, with complete control over the Lok Sabha there was no need for the prime minister to divide to rule, quite apart from his moral repugnance at such majority appeasement. Arun Nehru, on the other hand, saw which way RG's mind was working on the Shah Bano issue and noted that anger was growing in sections of the majority community, especially those who believed a great victory had been scored over the minority and its clerical leaders – the mullahs and maulvis – by the Supreme Court coming down so harshly on Muslim Personal Law. So, keeping the PM well out of the way was essential to Arun Nehru's 'clever' strategy of compensating the majority for Muslim Personal Law being preserved by giving Hindu worshippers access to '*Ram lalla virajman*' (Baby Ram present) within the precincts of the Babri Masjid. That explains RG knowing nothing of the goings-on in the Faizabad sessions court until the fait accompli of the locks being opened, with crowds of devotees surging in.

Rajiv Gandhi did not take this lightly. He ordered a party enquiry into the role of both Nehru and his political adviser Makhan Lal Fotedar. The enquiry showed Fotedar to be blameless but found Arun Nehru responsible for getting the locks opened. So, Fotedar was spared but Nehru was removed from the Council of Ministers; he was downgraded within the party and deprived of all clout and influence before himself quitting the party.

Moreover, Rajiv had also discovered Arun Nehru's shenanigans in the Bofors deal. Feeling cheated (by the prime minister's policy of no middlemen) of his grand strategy of filling the party coffers by creaming funds off overseas defence contracts, Nehru was instrumental in setting up the AE Services deal, as indicated by the diaries of Martin Ardbo,

managing director of Bofors, which indicted various personalities by initials. Among the initials was 'N', which either stood for Nehru – or Nobody! AE were promised payment of US\$35 million by Ardbo who was convinced the Government of India would otherwise place the order with his French rival, Sofma. When Arun Nehru was sacked from the Council of Ministers in September 1986, only a single instalment of some \$7 million had been paid. Mysteriously, no other payment was ever made once Nehru was removed from the scene although the contract stipulated further instalments totalling some \$28 million. Most observers, including Chitra Subramaniam, the journalist behind the Bofors 'expose', are agreed that Arun Nehru's desire to hide his own role was the primary reason for the V.P. Singh government dragging its feet on prosecuting the Bofors case once it came to office.

When he was nominated by his party as PM following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, convinced that it was wrong to continue without electoral sanction, Rajiv Gandhi had called an election within a few weeks of his becoming prime minister. Riding a massive sympathy wave, he was sworn in a second time in as many months as prime minister – and with an unprecedented mandate. With the same moral rectitude, when he was defeated in 1989, instead of staking a claim to form a coalition government on the grounds that his was still the largest single party, he preferred to inform the president that he would be content to sit in Parliament as leader of the Opposition. I have recounted in my memoirs how his classmate, Aroon Purie, owner-editor of *India Today*, believed RG would push aside the people's disapproval by resorting to technicalities to try to become PM a third time. On the basis of my knowledge of the man, and without asking him, I replied that he was not proceeding to Rashtrapati Bhavan to seek a third chance but would act on principle to tell the president that his opponent, the National Front, should be given the opportunity to form the government. And so it happened. Of course, the V.P. Singh government collapsed within

eleven months – but that is a different story and brought on his own head by the much-vaunted master ‘manager of contradictions’.² The fact is that instead of adroit political manoeuvring, Rajiv Gandhi preferred the straightforward constitutional way of resigning office when he lost the trust of the electorate. Would Arun Nehru have ever thought that way?

I underline that until his mother’s assassination, Rajiv Gandhi was not preparing himself for high office. He inherited from her all those who let him down: Arun Nehru, Arif Mohammed Khan, V.P. Singh, Gopi Arora, et al. Of his own friends whom he inducted into politics he was let down only by Arun Singh. Others like Ghulam Nabi Azad, Oscar Fernandes, Tarun Gogoi, Ahmed Patel and myself held firm. True, he made a bad choice for chief of army staff in General Sundarji – but I know of no PM in history anywhere in the world who has not tripped up on some appointments. What needs further underlining is that apart from a few exceptions, scores of ministers, thousands of party cadres and hundreds of government officers he appointed remained true to him. Picking the wrong man was not a characteristic but a hazard of office. I had wondered until recently whether he had not made a serious mistake in alienating President Giani Zail Singh. K.C. Singh’s recent book shows that the PM was quite right in suspecting that the president had not risen to the standards of his high office.³ He was still little more than a petty provincial politician playing his politics from the presidential palace against all constitutional norms. He did so even when (indeed especially when) this crossed the most important strand of Rajiv Gandhi’s political

² Dipankar Sinha, *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, Vol. 31, no.7, July 1991, pp. 598–612, <https://stor/stable/2645379>.

³ K.C. Singh, *The Indian President: An Insider’s Account of the Zail Singh Years*, HarperCollins, Gurugram, May 2023, pp. 204–23. It provides a view from inside Rashtrapati Bhavan of shenanigans that reveal a president deeply involved in hatching conspiracies with politicians, journalists and jurists to unseat a democratically elected prime minister by pushing presidential powers to the outer limit. The Constitution blocked him. The prime minister was fully informed of these sinister plots and stratagems.

policy – tackling Punjab by forging an agreement with moderate elements of the Akali Dal and its leadership.

On matters of policy, it was Rajiv Gandhi's exceptionalism that temporarily did him down but he stands vindicated by subsequent history. Thus, on Shah Bano, the easiest way out was perhaps the one commended to him by his desk officer for minority affairs, Wajahat Habibullah: that the highest court in the land had spoken and it was best to leave matters at that.⁴ Moreover, given the huge adverse reaction of large sections of the majority community and the intellectual, public opinion-moulding, left-liberal class, to intervene politically after the highest echelon of the judiciary had spoken was politically suicidal. Yet RG persisted because he felt that as PM he could not but listen to the anguish of the minorities – as expressed in Parliament and elsewhere – over the threat to their Personal Law, which they had been promised at the outset of independence would be protected. To betray that pledge would amount to endorsing the widely bruited view that Muslims as a community and their Islamic law was antediluvian, discriminatory, anti-women and oppressive. Rajiv Gandhi believed that as PM it was for him to understand, not condemn. He, therefore, carefully followed the seven-month-long debate in Parliament and interacted intensively with all concerned (as testified to on the floor of the House by the leader of the Opposition, Madhu Dandavate).⁵

It was only after thoroughly acquainting himself with all aspects of Muslim divorce law and practice that he concluded the answer lay in making Muslim law on divorce justiciable in our civil courts, so that abuse could be ended without giving offence to or betraying promises made to

⁴ Wajahat Habibullah, *My Years with Rajiv: Triumph and Tragedy*, Westland, Chennai, 2020, p. 98.

⁵ See Columns 378–79 of Lok Sabha Debates on 5 May 1986, where Dandavate cited the PM as saying: 'I am studying the entire situation and unless we take you into confidence no new legislation shall be brought.'

the minority. His numerous opponents seized on this to proclaim that Muslims were being 'appeased' by protecting Muslim Personal Law, while Hindus were being 'appeased' by opening the locks at the makeshift Ram Lalla temple built on the premises of the Babri Masjid, completely ignoring the larger context in which the decision was taken. Moreover, fifteen years later (and ten after Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated) the very Supreme Court that had passed the 1985 Shah Bano judgment ruled in 2001 that far from 'reversing' that judgment, the 1986 Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, actually 'codified' the judgment and made it integral to our civil law. And all this was achieved with the approbation of the Muslim community. For the past two decades, it is this codification in Indian civil law, wrought by the combined genius of Rajiv Gandhi and his law minister, Asoke Sen, that has governed all divorce cases, thus ensuring fair play for Muslim divorcees under the stern gaze of the local magistrate and the availability of the higher judiciary, if necessary, to divorced Muslim women. It is highly significant that for twenty years and more the Act has worked so well that little or no recourse has been had by any affected Muslim woman to the higher judiciary.

He was politically damned by Bofors. That too was a lie. In 2004, the Delhi High Court dismissed all charges of corruption against 'public officials', that is, the then PM, Rajiv Gandhi, and Defence Secretary S.K. Bhatnagar. The Modi government went in appeal but in November 2018 the Supreme Court snuffed that out by pointing to an investigation lasting over 4,000 days having yielded nothing. Yet Rajiv Gandhi continues to be pilloried. In this case too, he could have taken the easy way out, as recommended by Arun Singh and General Sundarji, of getting Bofors to name the recipients of the post-contract payouts and the reasons for these, subject to the PM pledging himself in advance to *not* acting on the information provided. Singh and Sundarji simply brushed off that condition. But RG would not let the prime minister

of India's word be played with in such a cavalier manner. Note that all papers relating to the payouts have been in the public domain and the courts since at least the latter half of the 1990s. They unequivocally show that, as RG had asserted, the payments were indeed 'winding up charges' and contractual payments, not bribes to secure the contract for Bofors.⁶ True to his word in Parliament, neither Rajiv Gandhi nor any member of his family was involved in any dubious financial transaction. And the Bofors gun, despite all the doubts raised about its military effectiveness, has proved its worth in the Kargil conflict. Yet general public opinion and a motivated press continue to castigate the innocent.

Rajiv Gandhi's first full year in office – 1985 – was a golden year. But from the beginning of 1986 to the end of his term in November 1989, it was largely downhill all the way. He saw many of his initiatives, such as in Punjab, which had seemed magical at first, unravelling and found himself simultaneously caught in swirling controversies ranging from the Shah Bano affair to the Babri Masjid, from the very ugly public spat with the president, Giani Zail Singh, to the IPKF expedition to Sri Lanka and, above all, the Bofors deal. These wrecked his public standing, leading to a humiliating defeat at the hustings. Had he the guile and amorality of Arun Nehru; the deviousness of V.P. Singh; the hypocrisy of Arif Mohammed Khan; the viciousness of Arun Shourie; and the opportunism of lesser fry, he might have lasted longer as PM, but would not have been the decent, compassionate, deeply caring, hard-working, constructive and imaginative human being he was.

These qualities of head and heart were manifest in his other initiatives: the accord that moderated violence-filled discord in Punjab, Assam, Mizoram, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Darjeeling; the constitutional amendments on Panchayati Raj; his bold opening to China that gave us thirty-five years of peace and tranquillity on the borders; his reaching

⁶ See Justice R.S. Sodhi's judgment of 31 May 2005 reported at 2005 SCC online Del 676, which may be accessed at <http://indiankanoon.org>.

out to Pakistan; the push he gave to ending apartheid, colonialism and external invasion in Africa; his Action Plan for a Nuclear-Weapons-Free and Non-violent World Order, which, after all these decades remains the only ever practical plan presented to the UN by a head of government for time-bound, phased and verifiable disarmament of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction; his Technology Missions aimed at harnessing high-tech to the urgent felt needs of the poorest of the poor; his attention to drought-proofing and flood control; his giving India its highest ever annual growth rate – 10.67 per cent in 1989–90 – never before achieved and not exceeded so far; his conception of the performing arts as a principal instrument for promoting the emotional integration of our culturally very diverse country; his drawing to the mainstream the social and geographical periphery of the nation; and his overarching aim of restoring India to the vanguard of the advancement of human civilization – a position India (and China) had held until the advent of European imperialism. All this, in the media's view as transmitted to general opinion, and as aggravated by incompetent press briefing in the PMO, was overtaken by V.P. Singh pulling out of his pocket a piece of paper on which he made the patently false claim that written on it was the number of the Swiss bank account into which the Bofors bribe of Rs 64 crore had been paid to Rajiv Gandhi. A total lie.

Ultimately, V.P. Singh proved to be not only one of the most transient prime ministers in the history of our democracy but also the one who restored respectability to the saffron forces that are now undoing our democracy. In the eighteen months he served as leader of the Opposition Rajiv Gandhi was arguably on his way to being restored as PM after having intensely reflected and introspected on ways that might have made him a less misunderstood and more long-lasting prime minister. But that was not to be. An assassin's bomb – the tragic outcome of his ill-advised decision to send the IPKF to Sri Lanka – blew all that away to the realm of speculation.

Mani Shankar Aiyar

This book – a companion volume to the author’s *Memoirs of a Maverick*, published by Juggernaut in August 2023 – is an attempt by an observer and sometime participant, but hardly an ‘insider’, to fairly assess the high and low points of Rajiv Gandhi’s prime ministership.

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30 May 2023/7 November 2023

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See detailed footnotes and endnotes by
scanning the QR code above.

The Accords

Punjab, Assam, Mizoram, Rajiv–Farooq: J&K, Darjeeling

Punjab

The Punjab Accord,¹ signed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi with Sant Harchand Singh Longowal in July 1985, started unravelling from the end of January 1986. According to the accord, Chandigarh was to be transferred to Punjab on Republic Day, 26 January. Haryana, which was sharing the city with Punjab, was to be compensated by transferring an appropriate slice of Punjab to Haryana, based on specific criteria that were set out in the terms of reference of a commission set up under retired Justice K.K. Mathew to decide the issue. These criteria included: ‘village as a unit’; ‘linguistic affinity’; and ‘contiguity’.² The tehsils of Fazilka and Abohar had been identified as possible areas to be transferred, provided the three criteria were met. The problem was that

¹ ‘Rajiv–Longowal Memorandum of Settlement (Accord), July 24, 1985’, *The Sikh Times*, http://www.sikh-times.com/doc_072485a.html.

² See paras 1 and 4.12 of the Annual Report 1986–87 of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Departments of Internal Security, States and Home, Ministry of Home Affairs. Also see P. Shiv Shankar, then law minister, at p. 9 of *Rajiv Gandhi’s India*, Vol. I, elaborated in footnote 3 of this chapter.

the overwhelming majority of Punjabi speakers in Kandu Khera came in the way of contiguity. This became the bone of contention. It was only if Kandu Khera and another smaller village were found to have a Hindi-speaking majority, however slight, that the contiguity of Fazilka–Abohar with Haryana could be established. Recognizing the crucial role of these two villages, both sides attempted to infiltrate speakers of their respective languages to create the requisite marginal majority. Amarinder Singh, a personal schoolfriend of Rajiv Gandhi's, played a crucial role in mobilizing the Punjabi speakers to sabotage the implementation of the accord. (So much for the 'Doon School mafia'!)

The situation deteriorated so rapidly that the home ministry flew in the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) to Fazilka–Abohar. When the Punjab government objected that the CRPF was biased towards Haryana, Punjab chief minister Barnala suggested that the more neutral Assam Rifles be brought in. This was accepted by the PM and acted upon overnight. All this lent considerable drama to the evolving events.

But late at night on 25 January, on the very eve of Republic Day, Justice Mathew threw in the towel, reporting that his commission had not been able to make a determination on which compensatory areas should be transferred to Haryana by Republic Day, the optimistically set deadline. In consequence, temperatures were raised in both states. A last-minute effort to get a decision from another former judge, Justice D.A. Desai, also failed to resolve the deadlock. Republic Day passed. The issue was later remitted to another learned retired justice, E.S. Venkataramiah, but the moment he calculated that Haryana deserved 70,000 acres in compensation for losing its place in Chandigarh, Punjab saw red. Thus, did good intentions melt into thin air and no one came away satisfied.

Rajiv Gandhi was right in seeing that Chandigarh could not be transferred without Haryana being compensated. What he had not or perhaps could not have foreseen was the difficulty in doing so. Not even three Supreme Court ex-judges could help him break the impasse. Some

thirty-five years later, the issue has been rendered irrelevant with both states having settled down to rationally sharing the city. The Corbusier buildings in the heart of Chandigarh are with Punjab, and the Panchkula suburb with Haryana, obviating the need to transfer any land. The two states have now been coexisting harmoniously for so long that one might well wonder what the fuss was about. However, since the Aam Aadmi Party government came to office in March 2022, there has been some idle talk of reviving the issue. It would only revive the violent troubles that Rajiv Gandhi thankfully ended.

There was another element of the accord that made it a package deal: the building of a link canal that would carry surplus Sutlej waters to the Yamuna which flowed past Haryana and thence through the Indira Gandhi Canal to irrigate parched northern Rajasthan. The prime minister had expected that both states would rationally see the advantage to *India* of the Sutlej–Yamuna Link Canal. Neither did. Their interest was confined to state interest and did not include any larger national interest. Hence, the efforts of yet another judge, Justice Balakrishna Eradi, and his commission to determine the fair shares of the three states concerned came to nought. That link too was to be completed by Republic Day, 1986, and inaugurated along with the transfer of Chandigarh to Haryana. But the project was barely begun by that date and remains a paper plan to date.

The only beneficiary of the unravelling of the accord and its non-implementation over the last three decades has been Pakistan. Under the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, Pakistan was entitled to the full flow from the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab rivers. India was entitled to all the waters of the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej. But we failed to implement enough projects to fully utilize our share of the waters. Thus, the surplus waters flowed into Pakistan.

Rajiv Gandhi had not anticipated that Punjab and Haryana, both then under Congress control, would hold out in the manner they did. He

seemed to have believed that they, like him, would place national interest above narrow state interest and the chief ministers' personal political interests. It could be said that he was naïve to imagine that they would be as large-hearted as he himself was. While the accord had generated considerable euphoria, the failure to ensure sustained follow-up action and the insistence on unrealistic target dates ruined both the accord and the reputation of the prime minister.

Before I close my remarks on the Punjab Accord, I must take note of a fallout of the crisis that could have shaken the constitutional foundations of our democracy. When the deadline of 26 January passed without the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, the Barnala government was threatened with the defection of some of its members of the legislative assembly (MLAs). To save the elected Akali Dal government, the PM decided that praise might be bestowed on the chief minister in the traditional President's Address to the joint Houses of Parliament in February 1986, notwithstanding Zail Singh having been a long-time rival of the Akali Dal in Punjab state politics. As he now held the highest national position, that of rashtrapati, and as everyone knew the President's Address is written by the government of the day and not the president personally, the PM hoped Zail Singh would rise above personal prejudices to serve the national interest. The rashtrapati initially refused to do so and returned the draft for reconsideration. He had to be reminded that his office constitutionally required him to act on the advice of the government if the proposal was put to him a second time. He eventually swallowed this bitter pill but his resentment spilled over in sometimes bizarre ways.³

³ I would urge interested readers to look at <https://www.rajivmisunderstood.com> (by scanning the QR code at the end of the chapter) where I have compiled extracts from an oral history of Rajiv Gandhi's premiership, including the Punjab issue, voiced by leading players of the time, including Chief Minister S.S. Barnala and P. Chidambaram, then minister of state for internal security in the home ministry. These are from Vol. 1 of *Rajiv Gandhi's India* (UBSPD, New Delhi, 1997) subtitled *Politics: Nationhood, Ethnicity, Pluralism and Conflict Resolution*. The four-volume publication is a faithful record of all discussions

Ritu Sarin reported in the *Indian Express* later that President Zail Singh told her he was attempting to collect Rs 40 crore (a huge sum in those days) to topple Rajiv Gandhi.

Relations between the PM and the president having already soured, this incident at the start of 1986 marked the beginning of open warfare between Rashtrapati Bhavan and Race Course Road. At the peak of this unseemly controversy, I got Vir Sanghvi, editor of *Sunday* magazine, to accompany the PM and me on a visit to Mizoram. Although the PM had never before met Sanghvi, he opened up a broadside aimed at Giani Zail Singh. I was so taken aback that after I had escorted Sanghvi to his seat, I went back into the PM's cabin and asked him whether he had really intended to disclose all he had to an unknown journalist. Sounding surprised at the question, the PM said he had not really disclosed the 'awful personal goings on at Rashtrapati Bhawan'. I held my peace but, inevitably, Sanghvi, on returning to Delhi spilled it all out to the president, giving Zail Singh the golden opportunity to join issue publicly with the PM on their differences. Interestingly, the entire incident made Vir Sanghvi one of the PM's most favourite journalists!

Perhaps RG should have tried to mollify the president, or Zail Singh should have reconciled his views to those of the government, as behoved his constitutional post, or resigned. As none of this happened, and others, particularly Arun Shourie, then editor of *Indian Express*, started taking political advantage of the breach by egging on the president, the atmosphere got charged with animosity, to the benefit of neither. Indeed, I got caught in the crossfire when, unaccompanied by the PM, I went to

at 'A Golden Jubilee Retrospective' organized at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation on the fiftieth anniversary of RG's birth. Many of the principal personalities of the Rajiv Gandhi period were still alive and active then, and their reminiscences were recorded, transcribed, edited (by me) for ready comprehension and then published under the overall supervision of Ashok Chopra, now with Hay House Publishers. Please also see Ambassador K.C. Singh's *The Indian President* (HarperCollins, 2023) for an authentic insider's account of the shenanigans that preoccupied Rashtrapati Bhavan.

a function in May that year addressed by the president and Shourie put him up to bait me, catching me on the horns of an agonizing dilemma to either talk back to the holder of the highest office in the land or just take it on the chin. It was typical of Shourie's bullying that he should have impaled me on these horns. Fortunately, with the intervention of R.K. Dhawan in early 1989, a reconciliation of sorts was effected between the PM and ex-President Zail Singh by RG inviting Zail Singh to break bread with him in the PM's house.

However, RG's endeavours on Barnala's behalf notwithstanding, the Barnala government could not long be sustained. The state government was dismissed, President's Rule imposed, 'supercop' K.P.S. Gill turned full blast on the Khalistani terrorists, and Operation Black Thunder II launched which cleared the Golden Temple complex of terrorists and thus broke the back of Khalistani terrorism in the state. Although Gill has been much praised for having rid Punjab of terrorism by the expedient of killing every known or suspected terrorist, one has to note the criticism of the best-informed critics like the very competent, law- and rule-abiding deputy commissioner of Amritsar at the time (and later chief secretary of Punjab), Ramesh Inder Singh, that Gill's policemen were 'war cops', 'lawless police-at war'. In consequence of the depredations on both sides, the victims killed, including the victims of terrorism, amounted to 'about 21,660 people, including nearly 11,787 innocent civilians' as against 'around 8,112' terrorists killed.⁴ He concludes that 'the cost of war was 'calamitous' and the strategy adopted 'inflicted a long-lasting scar on the Sikh psyche'.

Ramesh Inder Singh cites Gill's defence that 'there was at no stage in the Punjab operations, a state policy based on arbitrary violence, intimidation, human rights violations or the lawless elimination of alleged terrorism by the police'. Ramesh Inder then adds, 'The de facto reality,

⁴ Ramesh Inder Singh, *Turmoil in Punjab*, HarperCollins, 2022, particularly chapter 35 ('The War Cops'), pp. 371-92.

though, was quite different from the de jure stand.' His telling last line is: 'The Punjab Police eliminated militancy – it won the undeclared war for the nation, but in the process disabled many citizens and the State alike.'

It needs to be highlighted that notwithstanding the unravelling of the Punjab Accord, there was a huge contrast between the Punjab that Rajiv Gandhi inherited and the Punjab he left. The political atmosphere in Punjab had been so altered by the mere fact of the accord that, implemented or not, the prime minister was able to unleash K.P.S. Gill on the terrorists and crush the Sikh separatist movement in the state. Hence, by the time the Rajiv Gandhi era ended, 47 per cent of police stations in Punjab reported no terrorist incidents in their thana areas in the previous year.

Taking a longer view of the Punjab Accord in the third decade of the twenty-first century than had been possible in 1986, we see that following RG's initiative, peace and democracy have been restored to the state. In contrast to the vicious violence and communal tensions that had overtaken the state during the Janata regime (1977–79) and stretched into Indira Gandhi's second coming, leading to her assassination at the hands of her Sikh guards in 1984 and the dreadful Sikh pogrom that followed, Punjab today is a picture of communal harmony, well integrated with the rest of the country. The awful late seventies and early eighties have been relegated to the past. Rajiv Gandhi may not have succeeded in implementing the Punjab Accord, but his consistent actions – from releasing Sant Harchand Singh Longowal in January 1985 to visiting Hussainiwala in March 1985; preventing vengeance killings with an iron hand when eleven transistor bombs went off in Delhi in May 1985; signing the accord in July 1985; holding elections in September 1985; setting tight deadlines for the implementation of the accord; then conceiving and supervising Operation Black Thunder II – are what moved the state towards the normalcy that now prevails. Above all, it was his fearless tours of all parts of Punjab in 1988–89, travelling everywhere

by road (I organized the tours and travelled in the front open jeep), that reassured the people that it was the government, not the Khalistanis, who were with them. That is achievement enough.⁵

Assam

Less than a month after the Punjab Accord, the prime minister scored his next important political goal: the Assam Accord. R.D. Pradhan, Rajiv Gandhi's home secretary, has described in detail in his *Working with Rajiv Gandhi*⁶ how he fulfilled the PM's mandate to bring the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) to the negotiating table. The origins of their often vicious and violence-filled agitation (as in the case of Punjab) lay in the dying days of the previous Janata government (1977–79). It had been aggravated by Indira Gandhi insisting on going ahead with the state assembly elections in February 1983 which brought in Hiteswar Saikia of the Congress as the chief minister. The awful massacre of hundreds (sometimes estimated at 'thousands') of innocent Muslims in and around the village of Nellie during the elections had, fairly or unfairly, stained her reputation as she was seen as putting political advantage before common humanity, delegitimizing both the elections and their outcome.

The brutality and violence in the Brahmaputra valley were part and parcel of Rajiv Gandhi's political heritage. He had charged Home Secretary Pradhan with the responsibility of getting the student leaders to put their demands down in writing against the assurance that any agreement with them would be put to the test in free and fair elections – even if that resulted in a premature end to the Congress's Saikia government and the ushering in of an Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)

⁵ See Rajiv Gandhi's address on 3 March 1989 to the Lok Sabha in his *Selected Speeches and Writings*, Vol. 5, pp. 94–96, reproduced on this book's website that can be accessed by scanning the QR code at the end of the chapter.

⁶ Indus (HarperCollins), 1995, pp. 93–112.

government under the leadership of the student leader Prafulla Mahanta. It was a bargain that Mahanta and his colleagues could not refuse,⁷ although Rajiv Gandhi would pay a heavy price within the party for the Congress losing the states of Punjab and Assam in quick succession in 1985. That was typical of the man, putting national interest above party interest, knowing full well that it was only a matter of time before the Congress was back in office. It was a sacrifice never popular with the rest of the Congress leadership – although it went down extraordinarily well with the chattering classes.

As the student leaders took control of the state government, the violence they had engendered petered out. The north-east returned to the national fold, and while there were glitches, including the Bodoland agitation and United Liberation Front of Asam (ULFA) terrorist violence that needed to be tackled and ironed out after RG was no longer on the scene, the accord has held these last four decades. Assam is back to being part and parcel of the democratic ethos of India but is now being threatened by a Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) Union home minister who has referred to immigrants from Bangladesh (mostly Muslims) as ‘termites’. To go into all that, however, would be to take the Assam tangle to well beyond RG’s premiership.

⁷ In an otherwise critical account of the events that followed over close to four decades of the Assam Accord, Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty in her *Assam: The Accord, The Discord* (Penguin/Ebury, 2019) admits, “The mood was buoyant. Brij Sharma recalled, “It was akin to the moment of [India] gaining independence; as if we got for the Assamese people freedom and rights over their homeland when they were sleeping beyond the midnight hour” (p. 7). The allusion to Jawaharlal Nehru’s address on Independence Day is unmistakable: ‘At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakes to life and freedom.’ She adds on the next page (p. 8): ‘The prime minister’s mention of the Accord (at his Independence Day address) as a significant agreement from the pan-Indian point of view helped the AASU and AAGSP leaders remain confident about their decision to sign it.’

Mizoram Peace Accord

Although I am jumping the timeline, it seems to me to be appropriate to deal with the Mizoram Peace Accord of 30 June 1986 at this point to round off the story of how Rajiv Gandhi defused the three major hotspots – Punjab, Assam, Mizoram – he inherited when he was sworn in as PM.

One of the longest insurgencies in India, of twenty years standing beginning 1966, was in Mizoram. While the even longer insurgency in Nagaland had in a sense petered out several decades earlier after Jawaharlal Nehru had persuaded the Naga dissidents to participate in the democratic process, the insurgency in Mizoram had proved much more difficult to squelch since Mizoram's western border ran along the East Pakistan frontier, making it easy for the Mizo insurgents to slip across the border into the welcoming arms of the Pakistan army, who became their chief suppliers of military equipment and other military stores. Also, the eastern borders of Mizoram ran along the virtually unadministered border areas of Burma (Myanmar), making Burma too an easy place of refuge, a sanctuary for the insurgents, especially since there were ethnic and tribal bonds with those living in Burma. Most important of all, infrastructure development in this part of India was so poor that the Indian government had immense logistical difficulties in rushing emergency relief supplies to this distant corner of the country.

In consequence, when severe food shortages struck Mizoram in 1966, there was little the Government of India could or did do to keep the people from going hungry. The root cause of the food shortage was the 'flowering' of the bamboo, the most abundant plant in the hills of Mizoram. 'Bamboo flowering', which occurs on a wide scale around once every forty years, brings out rats in large numbers. Having eaten the bamboo flowers, the rats then gorge themselves on stored foodgrains and rapidly reproduce. This, in turn, brings about severe shortages of basic foodstuff for the people. The virtual famine of 1966 had sparked

insurgency under the leadership of Laldenga, a militant rebel leader of considerable political talent. While attempts had been made by Indira Gandhi's two governments (1966–77 and 1980–84), as well as by the Janata government (1977–79), to bring an end to the insurgency, it was only when Rajiv Gandhi took decisive steps to find a political settlement that finally brought the insurgents out of the maquis.

The crux of Rajiv Gandhi's political settlement lay in inducing Laldenga's Mizo National Front (MNF) to lay down their arms in return for the Centre handing over the post of chief minister to the insurgents' leader and getting the Congress party's duly elected CM, Lalthanhawla, to step down to become deputy CM.⁸ Elections followed; Laldenga was confirmed as CM in alliance with Brigadier Sailo; the two had a falling out shortly thereafter; another election followed in 1988 and the Congress party's Lalthanhawla triumphantly returned to the chief minister's post.

Since then, the Congress and the MNF have alternated in power every ten years. (The Big Question in Mizoram is whether this pattern will change in the 2023 state general elections. However, whatever the outcome, the Rajiv–Laldenga Accord will hold firm.) The former insurgents have, for the best part of four decades, wholeheartedly accepted the democratic electoral order in which the people decide by ballot, not bullet, who will rule and for how long.

The transformation of Mizoram from the most insurgency-ridden state for two decades, 1966–86, into the most peaceful state in the India over the next four decades has everything to do with Rajiv Gandhi's large-hearted, humane, and sensitive statesmanship in temporarily sacrificing his party's power to persuade the other side to give up arms and become

⁸ Mizoram figures so little in the consciousness of most Indians that I would refer the interested reader to <https://www.rajivmisunderstood.com> (or scan the QR code at the end of the chapter) for a more intensive explanation by Mizo participants and others to get the full flavour of the negotiations and their consequences, which were set out in Vol. 1 of Rajiv Gandhi's *India: A Golden Jubilee Retrospective*, *op.cit.*

a part of the normal democratic process. This is what he did in Punjab; this is what he did in Assam; and this is what he did in Mizoram.

I have vivid memories of the three-day tour of Mizoram that Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi took in the wake of the accord. We landed at Silchar, and drove to Aizawl via Vairengte and Kolasib. After a night halt at Aizawl, where the CM had arranged a concert by Van Lal Ruati, Mizoram's international singing sensation (I've never met a Mizo who does not sing beautifully), we continued through Serchip and Champhai to stop for the night at Lunglei. From there, we took a helicopter to Saiha.

It was a dizzying experience. Thousands lined the road chanting, 'Pu Rajiv Gandhi, Pi Sonia Gandhi,' strewing the road with flowers and petals, 'welcome' written not only on their banners but on their faces wreathed in smiles. They shouted out 'We love you' as the jeep sped past. I must have been on a hundred road journeys with Rajiv Gandhi, but none was as uplifting. There was not one dissident voice, not one frown. The geographic periphery of the country, its very edge, was opening its heart to the prime minister.

We had with us a brilliant photographer, Alope Mitra of the *Telegraph*, to capture all this for posterity. At the end of the trip, he gently mocked me in his Bengali Hindi: 'Tum kuchch nabi ho. Tum Bharat shorkar ke liye kaam karta hain. Mein Aubeek Shorkar ke liye kaam karta hoon.' (You are nothing. You work for Bharat sarkar.⁹ I work for Aweek Sarkar [the *Telegraph* editor/proprietor].) Aweek Sarkar has not stopped dining out on that story.

At Tlabung at the extreme south-west edge of the state, almost tipping into Bangladesh, the athletic Rajiv Gandhi climbed to the plateau on which our helicopter awaited us. I was straggling along well behind when a local villager caught up with me and asked who was the person ahead. I told him, 'The prime minister.' Shaking his head disbelievingly, the man said, 'Doesn't look like him. He doesn't have a moustache.'

⁹ For the Non-Hindi-speaking reader, I am taking the liberty of translating 'sarkar' into 'government'.

With a shock I realized the man thought his prime minister was General H.M. Ershad of Bangladesh. As our chopper took off, I recounted the incident to the PM. He ordered me immediately on return to tell Ajit Panja, the junior information and broadcasting (I&B) minister, to put up one of the first television towers on that plateau. And that is how TV came to Mizoram!

Although it is little remembered, I would regard the Mizoram Accord as the high point of Rajiv Gandhi's stewardship of the country. This was not a long-term view shared by many in the Congress party leadership. It, therefore, contributed in no small measure to the split in the party in 1987 and the defection of his cousin, the once-powerful Arun Nehru, as well as Arif Mohammed Khan and several other senior Congresspersons to the V.P. Singh camp. Practitioners of realpolitik may consider it foolish to surrender three Congress state governments to a nebulous future but my assessment is different. Morality and national interest triumphed.

It was not blindness that marked the Rajiv era. He was so confident that the Congress would ultimately triumph that he willingly surrendered power for a while in the full recognition of his party's inherent resilience to fight its way back. Punjab was to see several Congress governments after the Punjab Accord; the Congress, after a short five-year absence following the Assam Accord, returned to office in Guwahati/Dispur; and, as we have just seen, the Congress has been in office every ten years since the MNF was persuaded to end its insurgency in return for Laldenga being sworn in as CM even before contesting elections. The litmus test is whether ending rebellion and the threat to national integrity in Punjab, Assam and Mizoram was worth giving up, for a few years, the CM's seat to the other side.

Of course, the question was asked – and remains thirty-five years on – as to whether Rajiv Gandhi was not being naïve in turning over power to his opponents to the chagrin of his own supporters, some of whom

turned against him. The answer depends on how politics is viewed. If the point of politics is power by hook or by crook, then Rajiv Gandhi got the comeuppance he deserved. If, however, being prime minister means putting the national interest over petty partisan interest, then Rajiv Gandhi emerges in a different light. It was this different light that gave Rajiv Gandhi his 'golden year'; it was the revenge of the old politicians that spelt his nemesis. That downfall was temporary. Within eighteen months, he was riding back – when an assassin struck.

Mizoram stands integrated with India, transformed into the most peaceful state of the Union, indeed showing the way to the country how refugees fleeing the junta in Myanmar ought to be humanely welcomed. There are few problems of law and order, no problem of majority–minority clan clashes, and a large number of its brightest young men and women are joining the civil services and the armed forces. My private secretary as Minister, DoNER, was Vanlalvawna, Indian Foreign Service (IFS), a Mizo, who has just returned as Joint Secretary to Headquarters after serving as our ambassador to Azerbaijan. He was a superb choice, loyal to a fault, very hard-working and hugely knowledgeable about the region. Mizos, like other north-easterners, are spread across the country, prominent in the airlines and the hospitality industry. In the course of several visits to the state, in my capacity as Congress observer for the hill regions of the north-east (2000–02) and later as Union minister for the development of the north-eastern region (2006–09), I have learned that the people and all party leaders give the credit for the peace and harmony and opportunities for education, employment and development they enjoy to Rajiv Gandhi and his peace accord.

Tragically, in the last few months since this section was written, Mizoram has been swamped with some 40,000 refugees from Myanmar. There is commendable humanism in the manner these refugees have been welcomed in Myanmar, in sharp contrast to the political convulsions, emotional disintegration and ruthless violence that has overtaken the

neighbouring state of Manipur. Nothing illustrates more vividly the difference in approach to national integrity between the Rajiv and Modi governments as the virtual paralysis we have witnessed in Manipur.

Rajiv–Farooq Accord: J&K

The alliance between Farooq Abdullah of the National Conference (NC) and Rajiv Gandhi on behalf of the Indian National Congress was signed in November 1986 and the next month Rajiv decided to first visit Jammu and then Kashmir. I was on the trip. When we reached Udhampur, the army base, the weather turned so bad that his Air Force plane could not take off. Rajiv Gandhi then decided to drive up to Srinagar. We reached there in blinding snow. The following cars (which carried our baggage) got cut off by a landslide. We arrived in Srinagar six hours later, chilled to the bone and went straight to a meeting in the Centaur Hotel.

For the next two days, we were stuck in the snow-bound city but travelled around the Valley. Rajiv greeted and spoke to knots of Kashmiris gathered along the road. At one point, a Special Protection Group (SPG) personnel ran up to me in the front jeep and said the PM wanted me. I ran back to his jeep, and he simply pointed to the feet of the young women gathered around his vehicle. None of them had any footwear! They were walking and running on the snow and ice on their naked soles.

The visit, at one level, was a huge success in that it signalled the firming up of the alliance, and was underpinned by an unprecedented thrust to economic and infrastructure development, including bringing railways to the Valley, taking up huge hydroelectric projects and cleaning the Dal Lake. The downside was that the fundamentalist and separatist Muslim outfits made use of the Rajiv–Farooq Accord as a weapon in their vitriolic campaign against the secular forces.

When the promised elections to the state assembly got under way, the Muslim United Front's (MUF) campaign theme was that a victory

for the party in the elections would be a victory for Islam. There was no doubt that although the MUF might not win a majority of seats, it would make its presence felt as an effective and powerful opposition.¹⁰ In the event, thirty-eight seats went to the NC and twenty-six to the Congress (giving the alliance a total of sixty-four); the MUF won only four seats. However, the victory of the Farooq–Rajiv alliance in the J&K elections was somewhat pyrrhic because it presaged unprecedented turmoil in the Valley. Although the MUF lost the election, it received a lot of public sympathy.

Wajahat Habibullah cites the egregious example of rigging in the Amira Kadal constituency in Srinagar contested by a senior minister in Dr Farooq Abdullah's government, Ghulam Mohiuddin Shah, against the MUF's Mohammad Yusuf Shah. Drawing on Sumantra Bose's detailed study of the election, Habibullah concludes the Abdullah family simply got the returning officer to switch votes from the MUF to the NC to give their candidate a majority. This so incensed the 'losing' candidate that he and his polling agents joined the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen or the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), preferring the bullet to the ballot.¹¹

Did Farooq Abdullah go in for selective rigging because he wished to retain his independence without having to rely exclusively on Congress party support? This intriguing thought is put forward by Wajahat Habibullah who concludes that there was clear evidence of malpractice in only ten constituencies, primarily in Srinagar, where the support base of the NC had been tenuous.¹² If Habibullah is right about the rigging of ten seats, that would have brought the NC score down to twenty-eight, a whisker above the Congress's twenty-six. The election would have gone

¹⁰ Khem Lata and O.N. Wakhlu, *Kashmir: Behind the White Curtain, 1972–91*, Konark, New Delhi, 1992, p. 321.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 176–81 and other occasional writings, and Wajahat Habibullah, *My Kashmir: The Dying of the Light*, Penguin/Viking, Gurugram, 2011, pp. 72–75.

¹² Habibullah, *op. cit.*, pp. 178–79.

to the alliance but left the NC dependent on the Congress. This analysis implicitly holds that Rajiv Gandhi had nothing to do with the rigging; whatever rigging took place was undertaken only by the NC.

Habibullah believes that had rigging not occurred, the MUF – a potent though not dominant force – might have won fourteen seats. Perhaps this would have helped integrate Kashmir's politically conflicting forces but given the MUF's determination to undermine the integration process, such an outcome was unlikely.

While discontent may indeed have simmered in the Valley in the period between the state assembly elections of March 1987 and the general elections of November 1989, there was little outward manifestation of this discontent. As the government was in control of the situation, RG could make a number of very successful visits to Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, marked by peace, tranquillity and bonhomie, through the remaining years of his premiership. I was witness to all these visits.

One of the most remarkable of these was to the very remote village of Padam in the Zaskar valley of Ladakh that had been hit by a bad avalanche in the winter of early 1989. RG and Farooq Abdullah, accompanied by me, flew by helicopter from Leh to Padam, but could not land because the rotating wings would whip up the soft snow into a storm. This obliged the pilot to proceed to Kargil. At Kargil, I received a message from the advance SPG unit at Padam that it had stopped snowing and we could try now to land. After confabulations, it was decided that I should go back to Padam, and if I succeeded in landing, the chopper would return to Kargil and pick up the PM and CM.

I landed successfully. While I went around telling the waiting crowd that a second landing was being attempted, the two leaders returned, but the snowstorm caused by the rotors persisted. So, the chopper hovered a few inches above the ground while the PM and CM leaped off, went among the waiting crowd, and then jumped back on the hovering aircraft. I was a fitter and of course younger than I am now, and our athletic PM

was, of course, fit as a fiddle. The same could not quite be said of Farooq but he was game for this bit of gymnastics. The point I am trying to make was that there was no fear of public disorder disrupting the tour.

At a more personal level, Governor Jagmohan invited me and my family to spend a holiday in Srinagar as his guests in May 1989. We travelled to all the tourist spots from Gulmarg to Pahalgam, and all over the city and the gorgeous Dal Lake, with no security protection and no fear of any kind. The governor clearly felt that his guests were in no danger.

Added to all this was the massive tourist influx in October–November 1989 to see the leaves of the chinar turn golden. Nothing untoward happened to any of them. All of this goes to show that, at least on the surface, there was a measure of normalcy. The ensuing chaos after V.P. Singh became PM, and particularly after he nominated Jagmohan to the governorship, were rooted in the misjudgments of the V.P. Singh government and the blind prejudices of Governor Jagmohan.

Apart from the rumours of rigging that stoked the militancy of the nineties, the winding down of the jihad in Afghanistan brought in hordes of well-trained, well-financed and heavily armed jihadis, sponsored by Pakistan, into the Valley. A series of other adverse events also contributed to the deterioration of the political environment in the state: the utterly incompetent handling by V.P. Singh of the crisis over the kidnapping of his home minister's daughter; the needlessly meretricious release of captured terrorists who went on to wreak mayhem; the irresponsible appointment as governor of Jagmohan aka 'Halaku Khan';¹³ the resignation of the duly elected Farooq Abdullah on Jagmohan's appointment; the subsequent dissolution of the J&K

¹³ A thirteenth-century marauder, grandson of Genghis Khan, who conquered large parts of central and west Asia, and notoriously wrecked the famous library in Baghdad while laying the city to waste. At his instance, havoc was wreaked on the Delhi sultanate. In popular language, Halaku (also spelt Hulagu) has become synonymous with mindless inhuman destruction.

elected assembly by governor's fiat; selective targeted assassinations that were answered by the panic mass evacuation of Kashmiri Pandits; and the progressive weakening and eventual overthrow of the government of Benazir Bhutto, with whom Rajiv Gandhi had attempted to open a new chapter in India–Pakistan relations.

It was the election of the V.P. Singh government in December 1989 that shattered the calm. V.P. Singh appointed as his home minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, the Kashmiri Congress dissident who had resigned from the Congress in protest against the Farooq–Rajiv Accord and joined the dissident Congressmen whom VP had succeeded in gathering around himself in the National Front (which Rajiv Gandhi had famously mocked as the 'National Affront'.¹⁴ That it was, indeed, a National Affront is evident in how it legitimized the Hindutvist Bharatiya Janata Party – BJP – by making them partners in their war against Rajiv Gandhi, and that it took less than a year for the Front to collapse under its inherent contradictions).

Within days of Mufti taking over as the Union home minister, his daughter Rubaiya was kidnapped and held for several days. While Rajiv Gandhi, as leader of the Opposition, was attempting through his sources, particularly a Kashmiri judge in the Allahabad High Court, to get Rubaiya released without a stain, particularly on the grounds that Islamic law and practice prohibited the kidnapping of single adult women, the V.P. Singh government went on a completely different track. It decided to secure Rubaiya's release in exchange for the release of several dreaded terrorists being held in Kashmiri jails, who have since waged a proxy terrorist war against India in the Kashmir Valley.

In the middle of this maelstrom, the government announced the re-appointment of Jagmohan as governor. Jagmohan had kept a low profile

¹⁴ 'It is National Affront, Not a National Front: Rajiv Gandhi', *India Today*, 13 November 2013, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/voices/story/19881231-it-is-national-affront-not-national-front-says-rajiv-gandhi-798106-1988-12-30>.

while the Congress government of Rajiv Gandhi was in power at the Centre, only privately complaining to the PM about the J&K CM, but brought his hostility towards Farooq Abdullah into the open as soon as it was announced that he would be replacing General K.V. Krishna Rao as J&K governor. Farooq, in protest, also tendered his resignation as CM. This put Jagmohan in complete and unfettered charge of the state under the J&K Constitution. Targeted killings rose, communal provocations were blared from mosques on loudspeaker, and Kashmiri Pandits started their exodus; Jagmohan seemed completely incapable of controlling the situation.

While all this was happening, I was in my ancestral village of Kargudi trying to get myself registered as a voter with a view to standing from Tamil Nadu for election to the Rajya Sabha. In late January 1990, Rajiv Gandhi's private secretary, Vincent George, rang me at RG's instance to summon me back to Delhi post-haste. I arrived, found RG very concerned at developments in the Valley, especially the ability of militants to pick up and individually assassinate police informers, showing that they had access to secret lists. He tasked me to inform myself on the subject as fully as I could. I spent a month boning up on the subject and listening to RG sharing his views on developments in the Valley, partly with me but mostly with others. So, when the V.P. Singh government decided to send an all-party parliamentary delegation to Kashmir in March 1990, RG asked me to accompany him as a note taker. It turned out to be a searing personal introduction to the reality of J&K, and I dwell on it below in some detail because in my six years of working with RG, this was the first time I had occasion to watch him in combative action in a confidential discussion. (As things turned out, it was also the last.)

Despite the deputy prime minister, Devi Lal, heading the delegation, Governor Jagmohan was not at the airport to receive him or the delegation. On the way into town from the airport, Devi Lal loudly remarked on the complete absence of anyone on the roads. Everyone bar

Jaswant Singh of the BJP agreed with him. Not even George Fernandes spoke up for Jagmohan. Clearly, Jagmohan was just a BJP choice, not the consensus candidate of the ruling coalition.

So, when Rajiv Gandhi spotted that we were being driven to the Raj Bhavan and not to our hotel, the Centaur, he insisted that the bus driver reverse and take us first to the hotel. The governor arrived there panting but received little sympathy from any member of the delegation, except, perhaps, Jaswant, who was silently sulking in his corner. When RG objected to the discourtesy of the deputy PM being seated to the left of the governor instead of his right, Jaswant blew up like an untamed volcano and accused Rajiv Gandhi of being needlessly disruptive with minor points of protocol instead of coming to grips with the grave issues that had brought us to Srinagar. Meanwhile, I started taking down the proceedings almost word for word and I could see intrigued looks being darted in my direction as my pen flew over the pages of my notebook.¹⁵

The proceedings began placidly enough with the governor saying that the situation in the Valley was very grave, with not just a ‘collapse’ of the administration but a ‘take over’, leaving no civil administration worth the name. He asserted that ‘every component’ of the previous power structure had been taken over and the atmosphere was one of ‘fear and indifference’. He laid the blame for this squarely at the doorstep of the previous Farooq Abdullah government. He went on to inform the meeting that the whereabouts of officers of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the police were being supplied to the local militants; station house officers were receiving instructions from the terrorists; and everyone had been imprisoned in ‘a cage of terror’.

He went on to claim that on Friday, 26 January – Republic Day – plans had been afoot to gather 10 lakh people under the guise of

¹⁵ Interested readers are requested to look up the virtually verbatim record of the discussion and related documents on this book’s website: <https://www.rajivmisunderstood.com/> or by scanning the QR code at the end of the chapter.

conducting namaz with the aim of proclaiming independence through the captured stations of Doordarshan and All India Radio. He had, therefore, imposed a curfew and taken other stern measures to forestall the designs of the militants.

The governor then turned to the JKLF whose 'writ', he said, 'ran everywhere, with flags flying, terrorists converting hospitals into sanctuaries, and storing arms and ammunitions there. Even the doctors are in league with these terrorists.' He said calls to mass violence came from hundreds of mosques fitted with loudspeakers with extensions into the streets that made an 'unbearable noise' and were principally used to make 'political proclamations, in extreme language, using fundamentalist expressions'. He claimed he had sought to rectify 'this terrible situation' by rebuilding the administration. Moreover, he had stopped Maqbool Butt Day from being exploited by the militants. After he had come to Srinagar, there had been 'substantial progress'. He bemoaned the fact that 'the nation does not understand the gravity of the situation . . . The situation is very, very grim.'

At this point, there occurred the first flare-up of interjections when Rajiv Gandhi asked on which dates these killings of IB and police officers had started. As the governor vaguely replied, 'November . . . December . . .', P.L. Handoo (NC) asserted that the first assassination was in Anantnag (south Kashmir) on 2 January and we should 'stick to facts'. The governor said investigations into the killing of these officers had not even begun, claiming this was because of a collapse of the administration with a large number of government servants absenting themselves and being involved in subversive activities. He had had to start afresh.

The governor then turned to the action taken by him to deal with 'a local festival, Meeraaj-e-Aalam, which is just like our Dussehra'. This sparked further interjections and when the commotion died down, Rajiv Gandhi asked whether the terrorists had sophisticated weapons. The governor replied, 'In burst, they can fire sixty rounds.' At this, RG, who

was something of an expert on ballistics, expressed astonishment and the governor's adviser, Ved Marwah, had to clarify that the correct figure was not 'sixty rounds' but 'thirty rounds – Kalashnikovs'.

The meeting then turned to the vexed question of the governor unilaterally dissolving the state assembly. His explanation was that 'it was a totally unrepresentative assembly'. Instead of answering RG's question, 'How do you measure unrepresentativeness?', the rattled governor said that it was his constitutional right. 'The Constitution empowers me to make this determination in my own discretion.' (He was not referring to the Indian Constitution but to the J&K Constitution.) He categorically stated, 'Under the J&K Constitution, I have the right to decide this without consulting anybody.' He rejected the argument put forward by a CPI(M) member of the delegation that he should not have acted independently but consulted the Central government as the dissolution of the assembly is not an administrative matter but 'a political question'.

While the governor spiritedly maintained that 'by dissolving the assembly, I have shown the young men that they can elect whom they want', he refuted Rajiv Gandhi's point that the constitutional process could have been restored by asking the state assembly to elect its leader. Jagmohan's point was that the J&K Constitution did not require this matter to be decided 'at the satisfaction of the president but of the governor'. He had taken the decision to dissolve the assembly, because, in his view, what was needed was 'a new beginning to wean away the youngsters from terrorism'. The delegation did not accept the governor's argument, saying such a political decision required the governor to have gone in for 'wide-ranging consultations'. Rajiv Gandhi remarked, '*Yeh ajeeb baat hai . . .*' (This is weird talk) and Devi Lal concurred: '*Hai toh!*' (Yes, indeed it is!)

In the face of the governor's claim that he was 'establishing links with the people', RG asked him to realize that he was now 'completely isolated from the masses, with no control over the police, none over the

officers, and no proper information network'. Supplementing another CPI(M) member's remark that the governor's actions 'were only leading to anarchy', RG provoked the governor into asserting that, in his judgement, both the NC and Congress, which together held a clear majority in the assembly, 'had become irrelevant'. He cited by way of proof the complaint of youth that 'the 1987 elections were rigged'. He also cited the statement of Shabbir Shah, the People's League leader, that 'if the Farooq government is removed, the problem will be solved'. I saw Handoo's eyebrows rise in astonishment.

The governor then made the extraordinary suggestion that the answer to the political conundrum lay with the JKLF as it is 'based on the catholic, eclectic, and accommodating local version of Islam . . . If we give JKLF youth the opportunity to elect their representatives, they will fall in line.' This evoked derisive laughter from most members of the delegation.

Rajiv Gandhi then moved to the crux of the matter. He asked, of the seventy-six seats (plus two nominated) in the assembly, how many, in the governor's opinion, were rigged? Instead of answering this straight question, the governor offered the unbelievable assertion that 'Shabbir will fall in line after the hard core is pushed out by administrative action. We will demolish the Jama'at-e-Islami and Hizb-e-Islam.' He went on: 'In my judgement, if the terrorists are arrested, we will be able to hold elections.' The governor then added that Farooq Abdullah, on 15 February, had accused him of 'turning Kashmir into a Nazi concentration camp, compared me to Halaku and threatened an international inquiry . . . In the face of such inflammatory statements by the former CM', the governor claimed he was left with 'no alternative but to dissolve the assembly'. Rajiv Gandhi's riposte was succinct: 'The plan is clear. Finish the Congress and NC. And bring in the JKLF!'

RG then returned to his question of how many seats, in the governor's view, were rigged. Forced into a corner, the governor replied, 'Not less

than sixteen or seventeen.’ Rajiv Gandhi responded, ‘The governor says sixteen seats were rigged. That means the NC–Congress won a clear fifty out of seventy-six seats.’

P. Shiv Shankar of the Congress, former law minister, then enquired what were the numbers of ‘infiltrators, terrorists, fighters’. The governor replied, ‘between 2,000 and 5,000’. To combat them, the governor said he would ‘rebuild the administrative structure’, to which Rajiv Gandhi responded: ‘First, you destroyed the political process and now you are destroying the administration.’

Responding to a question from Biplab Dasgupta of the CPI(M), the governor said that as the success of their programme depended ‘on the balance we strike’, his instructions were ‘to use the minimum of force’. ‘Neither our paramilitary nor BSF [Border Security Force] are permitted to use their sten guns.’ To which Rajiv Gandhi retorted: ‘The BSF does not have sten guns. They have carbines. Can we be more precise, Governor?’

P.L. Handoo of the NC – he whose eyebrows had shot up – then turned to the importance the governor was attaching to Shabbir Shah. He remarked that Shabbir Shah, the leader of the People’s League, had been in prison since 1983. ‘After his release, he went underground. He was caught and had been jailed again.’ How could such a person be relied on? Handoo observed that Doordarshan had shown the militants celebrating the release of five hardcore terrorists on 13 December 1989. ‘That,’ he asserted, ‘was the start of the trouble.’

The debate then moved to the troubling question of the exodus of the minorities. Handoo asserted, ‘We have always been a secular people. The Kashmiri Pandits have always been protected by the Muslims.’ The governor replied that the terrorists were looking for soft targets like the Kashmiri Pandits and he had acted on the request of the Kashmiri Pandits Association.

When he was asked how many Kashmiri Pandits had left, the governor replied, ‘6,000 to 7,000 families’. But Kedar Nath Sahni of the BJP said,

‘14,000 families, amounting to about 80,000 individuals, were registered in Gita Bhavan [New Delhi] alone’. At which Rajiv Gandhi pointed out, ‘Out of one and a quarter lakh [KPs], 80,000 have left the Valley. 70 per cent! Why is the governor’s information on the exodus wrong? How then can he be right about the numbers killed?’

On RG asking the governor to arrange for the delegation to go into town and meet the people, including the associations for which he had a ready list, the governor declined, said he had ‘no contact with local associations and would not arrange for the delegation to meet anyone’. At this point, Deputy PM Devi Lal concluded the meeting, exclaiming: ‘*Governor sahib, aap hame airport tak pahunchayen toh ganimat hogi*’ (Governor sahib, if you could but reach us to the airport, it would be a great mercy).

During this meeting, RG was clearly better prepared than his interlocutor and was adept at assessing the governor’s performance. The meeting remains in my memory as one of the most memorable exchanges I have witnessed. I am glad I recorded it virtually verbatim.

In the afternoon a ‘Joint Statement by the Leaders of the Political Parties’ was prepared for release to the press. Asserting that ‘the identity of Jammu and Kashmir has been maintained within the framework of the Constitution and this shall be maintained’, the leaders ‘firmly’ declared that ‘no sinister designs against the unity and territorial integrity of India shall be permitted to succeed’. Affirming their conviction that ‘political activity in Jammu and Kashmir must be revived’, they said, ‘All our efforts will be unitedly directed to this national goal.’

While this statement was being drafted, RG met with some fifty-four Kashmiris representing diverse political and business interests, as well as intellectuals from academia and the media, who were rounded up at short notice by the J&K Congress leaders in the face of the governor’s refusal to cooperate. This gave RG a broad-spectrum picture of the ground position, aided by the summaries of these conversations that I was able

to furnish him. He also attempted to meet the staff of the hotel, but that encounter was disrupted as slogans of 'Azadi' rent the air.

Following the press release, a statement was made by the official spokesman at the meeting that it was 'recommended that the Government of India appoint a Cabinet Minister for Jammu and Kashmir Affairs who will associate with his work an Advisory Committee which would include representatives of political parties participating in the meeting' to 'examine ways and means of reviving political activity, mobilizing people and involving them in the fight against the forces of secessionism'.

On returning to Delhi, RG drafted a letter to Prime Minister V.P. Singh dated 12 March, to which I contributed as well. I then personally delivered it to the PM's residence. Pointing out that neither Doordarshan nor Akashvani had broadcast the crucial paragraph relating to the Advisory Committee required 'to revive the political process and look into the genuine problems and grievances of the people', the letter said that while almost all newspapers had led with this paragraph, this information could not reach the people of the Valley because 'newspapers from rest of India are not reaching the Valley'. While noting the appointment of a Cabinet Minister for J&K Affairs had been announced, RG urged the government to end the delay in naming the minister and nominating the Advisory Committee.

RG then called on President Venkataraman, with me and others, to confidentially brief him on what we had seen and heard. He subsequently told the Congress Parliamentary Party that while matters had been under control during the tenure of the previous government, the governor himself had described the present position as not the 'collapse' of the administration but its total 'take over'. RG asserted that 'no one agrees with what the governor is doing', with the steps he had taken 'only result[ing] in a total alienation of the local civil service and the local police'. RG then went on to charge the governor with 'simply playing into Pakistan hands' by making irresponsible allegations of rigging in the March 1987 elections.

The Congress president then explained that ‘the governor’s administration was seen as a totally communal government’ and the governor himself had admitted to his lack of contact ‘with any local association or body of people’. He further underlined that as a result of the ‘total isolation of the governor from the people’ the local Kashmiri people were describing him as ‘Turkman Gate commander’, ‘Hitler’ and ‘General Dyer’ (he did not mention the most popular appellation: ‘Halaku’). The Congress president then underlined the revival of political activity in the state as the ‘basic requirement’, given that ‘normal life in the Valley had been totally disrupted’, with Indian Airlines accepting no cargo, post offices accepting no packets, telephone lines down, communication and transport links with the rest of India virtually snapped, and even the Kashmiri language newscast on Doordarshan coming from Delhi, not from Srinagar.¹⁶

While George Fernandes was named minister for J&K affairs, the all-party advisory committee was never set up. But soon after the delegation’s visit, Jagmohan was prematurely recalled in May, and another more sensitive and sensible governor sent in his place.

Whether the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits was the consequence of genuine fear or the incompetence of the governor in not providing them with adequate assurances of safety or adequate physical security is a battle that still rages in the politics of the state, in think tanks and discussion groups, in Parliament and the media, but there is no getting away from Jagmohan’s own statement in his memoirs that his additional director general of police had informed him that from ‘December 1989 to May 15, 1990, 134 innocent persons were killed by the militants’, the number of Hindu victims being seventy-two.¹⁷ The governor did not do the simple arithmetic required here: this meant sixty-three of

¹⁶ All India Congress Committee (AICC) press release extracts.

¹⁷ Jagmohan, *My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir*, Allied Publishers Ltd, New Delhi, 1991, p. 478.

the 134 victims were Muslims! This, in turn, meant that the number of assassinations of Muslims and Hindus were substantially comparable, from which the conclusion may be drawn that while the terrorist killings seriously impacted the Kashmiri Pandit community, it affected Kashmiri Muslims almost as much and eventually much more. Yet the governor was complicit in abetting or acquiescing in the mass departure of the Kashmiri Pandits. They have never since been enticed back or settled in the Valley, bar stray individuals or groups (and now non-Kashmiri retired armed and security forces personnel), although all political elements, including the Hurriyat, have declared that Kashmir without the Kashmiri Pandits is not the Kashmir they want. The efforts of the BJP government since the abrogation of Article 370 and removal of statehood on 5 August 2019 have signally failed to resettle the community in Kashmir, and many of the thousands of Pandits recruited into government service have fled their posts in the Valley in the face of the administration's gross failure to afford them adequate security with several Kashmiri Pandit officers being the target of terrorist attacks.

Recently, Ram Puniyani of *Secular Perspectives* has circulated a Right to Information Act (RTI) response from the deputy superintendent of police, Srinagar, which affirms that the total number of Kashmiri Pandits killed since 'the inception of militancy in 1990' is eighty-nine, compared to the killing of people of other faiths (principally Muslim) that stands at 1,635.¹⁸ These official figures demonstrate that starting from V.P. Singh's time, there has been chaos and anarchy in the Valley fuelled by terrorism but that the communal colour being given to the troubles by films like *The Kashmir Files* (2020) is, to put it mildly, 'unhistorical'.

I had my final word when Jagmohan wrote a personal account of

¹⁸The response was to P.P. Kapoor of Samalkha, Panipat, Haryana, dated 27 November 2021, No. HQR's/RTI/S-91/2021/108-09. A facsimile of the RTI response is reproduced on my website <https://www.rajivmisunderstood.com/> (or scan the QR code at the end of the chapter).

his tenure under the curious title *My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir*. The opening sentence of my review for *Sunday* magazine read: '*My Frozen Turbulence*, is not, as you might imagine, the autobiography of a stud bull. It is Governor Jagmohan's exculpation of himself.'

Jagmohan never thereafter spoke to me. I was not surprised.

Darjeeling

The naming, establishment and operationalizing of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hills Council was the only political issue where I was directly instructed by the PM to involve myself. I have refreshed my memory by reading the proceedings on Darjeeling at the 1994 Rajiv Gandhi Golden Jubilee Retrospective.¹⁹ It was a session I chaired.

Subhash Ghisingh (his name is variously spelt in English) served as a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) in the Indian Army and on retirement started a little-noticed agitation for 'Gorkhaland' in 1979, forming the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in 1980. The demand reverberated in the hearts and minds of the Darjeeling Gorkha population. Over the next few years, Ghisingh succeeded in harnessing the trade unions of the tea plantations. Soon, the Darjeeling Hills appeared to have become the political fiefdom of Subhas Ghisingh.

It was as his personal popularity rose and rose that Ghisingh made his cardinal error. Not finding a willing ear to listen to him in either Calcutta or Delhi, he unleashed a spate of violence and arson to draw attention to the cause. Even more dangerously, he visited the king of Nepal in Kathmandu (on 23 December 1983) to persuade him to denounce the 1835 treaty under which Nepal had ceded the Darjeeling Hills tract to British India to serve as a 'sanatorium' for British soldiers of the East India Company. The following year, Ghisingh also petitioned the UN

¹⁹ See the text of the proceedings at <https://www.rajivmisunderstood.com> or by scanning the QR code at the end of the chapter.

for the restitution of the rights of the Darjeeling Gorkhas. As a result, he was labelled an ‘anti-national’ by the Marxist government of West Bengal and in general Indian opinion.

The crux of the issue was the question of ethnic identity; overlaying this was the issue of discrimination. The inhabitants of the hill areas of Darjeeling were not Bengalis but Gorkhas; they did not speak Bengali but Gorkhali/Nepali. Frustrated at not being heard and desperately seeking some way to articulate his grievances, Ghisingh gave his opponents the chance to denounce him as ‘anti-national’ – and that closed the door to further discussion.

It was at this point that PM Rajiv Gandhi stepped into the breach. He sent for Inderjit, a well-known journalist, who, at the invitation of the West Bengal Governor Uma Shankar Dikshit, had gone to Darjeeling in May 1986 with his family on a short vacation. When the governor had asked Inderjit whether, as a newsman, he wanted to meet Ghisingh, Inderjit demurred. But his daughter, who had just started at the *Times of India*, insisted she would like to go with her father to meet Ghisingh. The meeting launched Inderjit as Delhi’s principal interlocutor with the GNLFF. Inderjit told the prime minister that all Ghisingh wanted was a separate state, not a separate nation. India had conceded such states as Nagaland and Mizoram, and Ghisingh accordingly felt it was the Gorkhas’ due.

On 18 December 1986, Rajiv Gandhi drove into Darjeeling at the end of a long road journey that had taken him along the spine of West Bengal in what was clearly the opening shot of his election campaign for the West Bengal assembly elections of March 1987. On the road journey over several days and several visits, he had been mobbed by the most ardent crowds, to the delight of the local Congress leaders and workers who thought (as I did) that this spectacular welcome betokened a comeback for the Congress in Bengal from the political wilderness. (We were wrong!)

I had expected a similar welcome at Darjeeling. So, I was stunned by the embarrassingly thin gathering at the St Paul's grounds when the PM arrived to address his first public meeting in Darjeeling. There was not a Gorkha face to be seen. Ghisingh had ordered a boycott of the prime minister and his orders had been obeyed. I was further utterly confused to see Rajiv Gandhi mount the podium, quite unfazed, and deliver himself of a full speech to almost nobody. I asked him later why he had bothered to speak at such length to nobody, and he replied: 'I knew Ghisingh had ordered his people to not turn up but I also knew he had posted his people all around the ground to hear what I said. So, I spoke at length knowing that every word I uttered would be transmitted within minutes to Subhas Ghisingh.'

After the West Bengal assembly elections of March 1987, Rajiv Gandhi resumed his efforts at effecting a tripartite agreement among Ghising's GNLF, the West Bengal state government and the Centre. These negotiations bore fruit in August 1988 with the creation of a semi-autonomous council to look after the district of Darjeeling. It was proposed to include Ghisingh's party in the council, with him at its head. One last hurdle was the name of the hill council. Home Minister Buta Singh called me to say the PM had asked him to discuss this with me.

I replied, 'Surely Darjeeling Hill Council should do?'

'Ghisingh,' said the home minister, 'is insisting that Gorkhaland should figure in the name. Jyoti Basu says, "Nothing doing." What do you suggest?'

'How about Gorkha, not Gorkhaland?' I suggested.

The compromise – Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council – was accepted by all.

Funds were provided for a secretariat to house the council. The PM travelled to Darjeeling in May 1989 to inaugurate the building. Ghisingh made up for his discourtesy of December 1986 by organizing a truly massive public reception on the same St Paul's grounds.

The Rajiv I Knew

The Darjeeling Accord was the final feather in Rajiv Gandhi's cap, vindicating his policy of not regarding dissidents as enemies, but partners in nation-building whose concerns should be heard, understood, and accommodated. Another key principle: always ensure that national interest takes precedence over party interest, if the two are in conflict. It is a lesson the present establishment (2023) needs to learn or relearn.

Having examined the accords that brought peace to various hotspots around the country, we now turn to the controversies through which he waded from the beginning of 1986 to his defeat in the general elections of November 1989.



See detailed footnotes and endnotes by scanning the QR code above.