

Clean sweep for the Congress party upsets schemes of the destabilizers

Never before in the history of independent India has any government received such an overwhelming mandate. The Congress party won 401 out of 508 parliamentary seats contested, sweeping by the benchmark two-thirds majority needed to control the Lok Sabha (parliament), and racking up an unprecedented popular vote as well. The Congress swept the north and west and made very strong inroads into the east and south as well. In fully 11 states and union territories, the Congress won every single seat, among them Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi. In the process, nearly all the kingpins of the Opposition were trounced, most on their own "home ground" and often by margins of 100,000 or more votes!

Everything about this crucial election defied the logic of Indian politics as it had come to be understood, and the pundits and prognosticators in the press and elsewhere were left gasping by the roadside as the "Rajiv wave" rolled through. First, the foreign-supported separatist provocations, culminating in the brutal assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, did not succeed in throwing the nation into prolonged chaos. The election took place promptly and on schedule following a smooth transition of power to Congress Party General Secretary Rajiv Gandhi.

Second, the chess game of caste and communal politics played most assiduously by the Indian press and politicians, including the socialist and Muscovite varieties, did not function. The shock of the assassination and attempted destabilization provoked the population to focus on fundamental issues of national integrity. As Abdul Ghafoor, general secretary of the Congress (I) and newly-elected MP from Bihar, said in an interview, "The people took Indira Gandhi's death very seriously. They felt if she could die, then so could the country."

But, the vote was not merely a *reaction*—whether of sympathy for Rajiv Gandhi for the loss of his mother, or the more insidious assertion of a "Hindu backlash" posited by some tendentious commentators. Quite the contrary, the vote was a positive and forward-looking statement, a genuine mandate. The seriousness of the voters and the breakdown of communal calculations can be seen in an analysis of the voting patterns.

Voter turnout on average was unusually high, ranging from 60 to 90%. While the urban electorate's turnout was

generally on the low side, voters in the cities came out overwhelmingly for the Congress. The party's "clean sweep" of all seven seats in New Delhi is indicative. In the four major cities of the country the Congress took 18 of the 20 available seats.

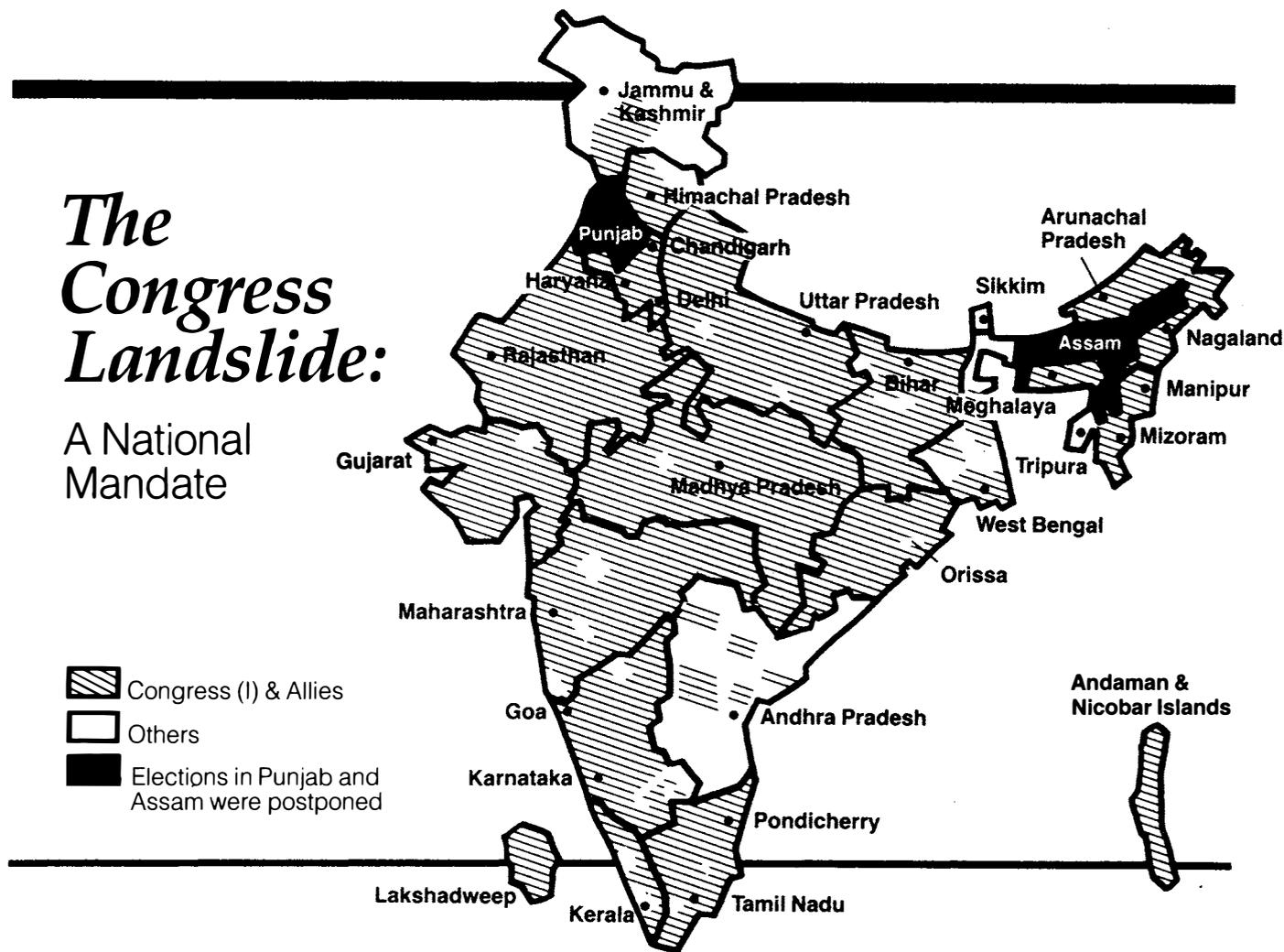
A recent *Press Trust of India* analysis showed, moreover, that the electorate in the periphery of the country participated more than that of the so-called Hindi-belt states of north and central India. The states of Kerala, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as the Union Territory of Lakshadweep, recorded more than 75% voter turnout. Individual constituencies in these states and in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal recorded voter turnouts between 75% and 85%. By contrast, only 10 constituencies from the entire Hindi belt had a turnout of more than 70%.

This large voter turnout in the south, widely touted as the preserve of regional parties challenging the Congress and central authority in general, overturned many assumptions. The case of the Congress' worst defeat is instructive. While the Telegu Desam (TD) party of Chief Minister N. T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh did take 28 of the 40 seats contested, with its allies in the opposition taking six seats, the popular vote actually indicates increasing support for the Congress. The Congress' 42% vote compares favorably with the TD's 44%, and was a marked improvement of its 33% vote in the 1983 Assembly elections. This portends a likely lively fight in the Assembly elections scheduled for early March in Andhra Pradesh and eight other states. There is little doubt that if the Congress can straighten out its state organization, an entirely feasible prospect given the remoralization at the national level, the real strength of the TD will be tested.

Similarly, in West Bengal where the Congress made significant gains against the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) on its own turf, the popular vote gives insight into the quality of the national victory. While in 1980, the Congress could only muster 36% of the vote against the Left Front's 54%, this time both have secured just over 48%. Although the Left Front managed to hold 26 of the state's 42 Lok Sabha seats, its margin of the popular vote is a minuscule 0.2%. Significantly, the Left Front, which rules the state, was trounced in many of its strongest urban, semi-urban, and industrial bastions. Many among the 11 sitting Lok Sabha members who lost are prominent party leaders.

The Congress Landslide:

A National Mandate



The Opposition based its strategy essentially on fostering a communal backlash against the Congress (I) in the wake of the attacks on Sikhs following Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. To the chagrin of the Opposition, however, which had counted heavily on Muslim votes as part of its campaign, the Muslims—about 20% of the population—refused to act like a “minority.” Exemplary was the situation in New Delhi, where a Muslim swing away from the Congress was widely touted. The Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in India, had given the word that the vote was to go to the BJP's Muslim candidate Sikander Bakht, a veteran opposition candidate. That the Imam's authority in this matter was not taken seriously can be seen from the fact that at a polling booth one block from the Imam's home, 739 of the 740 votes went to the Congress!

The failure of caste calculations was best demonstrated in Bihar, the country's most backward state and noted for its castism, where the Congress took an unprecedented 48 of the 54 seats. During the 1970s the backward castes had been

systematically organized against the Congress by the jacobin-socialist Jayaprakash Narayan, and even in 1980, while the Congress won 30 seats, it did so with a very thin 36% of the popular vote. Political pundits expected a mixed outcome with voting confined to caste lines. This was not to be, as the fate of Karpoori Thakur, self-appointed leader of the backward classes in Bihar, indicates. Thakur, who defeated his Congress rival by 475,000 votes in 1977 and survived in 1980 with a margin of 145,000 votes, was defeated by about 50,000 votes. In tens of constituencies, opposition stalwarts met with defeat at the hands of virtual “non-entities.”

Third, and closely related to the above, the opposition was rejected out of hand. The combined strength of the Left was reduced from 56 to 33 seats and the rest of the Opposition plummeted from 180 to 106. Infamous for having no constructive programs or policies for the country, the Opposition parties are integrally associated with the corrupt logic of caste and communal politics. Their repudiation is a measure of the positive nature of the vote.