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4 West Wheelock Street
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Pramila Jayapal is an Institute Fellow spending two years living amid and writing about societal issues in widely diverse regions of India.

The World's Largest Democracy Goes to Vote

NEW DELHI, India

May 1996

By Pramila Jayapal

This is the first general election in India that I have personally witnessed. Sitting through the build-up to this significant event and the aftermath of jockeying to form a government has, in some strange way, made me feel more of a part of this country. It reminds me of the 1992 U.S. elections, when I decided to work on a presidential campaign. As a non-US citizen, I could not vote. Yet, participating in the political process and the selection of leaders that are essential to the shape of a country's development gave me a greater sense of belonging in American society.*

As I watched India go to the polls this year, I understood why E.M. Forster once said, "Indians are obsessed with politics." As my interest in and direct experience of Indian politics increases, I feel as if I am stepping into the Indian shoes that I had left outside the door many years ago. There is also the practical element of being in the actual surroundings of the "event." The headiness, the uncertainty, the changes that I have witnessed in the last month have been an immersion experience into not just India's politics, but India's people, their concerns and their futures. I was able to simply watch the process of political democracy as it unfolded both its most brilliant and darkest sides.

THE VOTING PERIOD

There is no such thing as "election day" in India. Voting takes place in three phases, with specified areas of the country assigned to vote at different times. The first phase commenced April 17th, the second ten days later, and the last on May 2. Vote counting began several days after the last phase, and took up to a week to complete. By May 7, results began to trickle in, and counting concluded on May 11. Over the course of these 2.5 weeks, over 300 million people across the country, from different castes, religions, communities and regions went to cast their votes.

India follows the British Parliamentary "first-past-the-post" system. The party that wins a simple majority of 266 seats in the Lok Sabha (India's elected house) is invited by the President to form a government. If no party wins a majority there is no constitutionally mandated protocol, but the likely outcome (although this ended up being a highly debated issue) is that the President will call on the party that wins the most votes to form the government. He will give that party a specific amount of time to garner enough support for a majority or to form a coalition government. If a party is unable to do either of these, it can try to obtain support from "the outside." This means that an outside party can pledge its support to the ruling party (assuming it has a large enough vote block to reach a majority), without actually joining them in a coalition government. A government of this type is highly unstable because the support can be pulled at any time. Since Independence in 1947, this form of government has occurred only three times.

This year, predictions ran high that none of the parties would win an outright majority, and that the government would end up as a coalition of several parties. The papers were full of polls showing that voters were tired of government in



Outside the Congress Party Headquarters: Rao's ads try to convince voters that his five years have made their lives better.

general and fed up with corruption. According to one poll, 50 percent of voters felt their Ministers had done nothing for them. "We want a change," they were saying. It was reminiscent of the situation in the 1992 U.S. elections.

My husband, Alan Preston, and I were in Mussourie during election day in Uttar Pradesh. Mussourie is part of the hill region of Uttarakhand in U.P. state. For several years, there has been strong agitation for a separate state of Uttarakhand. In this election, the Central Uttarakhand Samiti Sangarsh (USS), the NGO leading the agitation, had called for a boycott of the elections in support of the Uttarakhand movement. The Mussourie chapter of the USS, though following the dictate of the central committee, had made it clear that there would be no forcible stopping of voters at the booths.

By 7:30 a.m., several people had come down and up the steep slopes of Mussourie to cast their votes. The small center near the town's clock tower was buzzing

with action, the streets made colorful by the banners of various political parties. I wandered past the voting registration tables to Hukum Panwar Singh's office. Singh is an experienced lawyer who has been politically active all his life, and is now President of the Mussourie chapter of the USS. He came downstairs from his flat above the office, clothed in a thick woolen dressing gown, his hair disheveled. We sat in front of shelves of leatherbound law books, sipping steaming cups of *chai*.

"Do you really believe that boycotting the elections is the way to get what you want for Uttarakhand?" I asked him. He looked at me, as if trying to assess the intent of my question.

"This boycott of the elections is based on the decision of the central committee," he said. "We have told the central committee that we do not believe in violence, and we will not forcibly stop people from voting. In a democracy, people have the right to vote. But we



Voter registration table in Mussourie on Election Day

must follow what the central committee mandates.”

“But will it make a difference?” I pressed him.

“Not voting is an emotional issue,” he replied. “It shows solidarity with the goal of the movement. And the turning point for many people was the insane violence that the police displayed when they killed those innocent demonstrators,” he continued, referring to an incident some years ago when several people were killed by the police during a demonstration.

I asked him if not voting was also an emotional issue for him, specifically thinking of the fact that his son was one of the people who was seriously wounded during the police firings. The boy is still unable to speak properly, and has suffered severe damage to his mental faculties. His answer showed his undying commitment to his cause: “Of course, it was very difficult. But I am a man of politics. I have been jailed for the things I believe in. I told my son not to come that day, but he insisted on dropping me off and then staying for the rally. Then he was shot. If it was to happen, there was nothing we could have done to prevent it.”

“So do you believe the Central Committee’s boycott strategy is the best one?” I asked again.

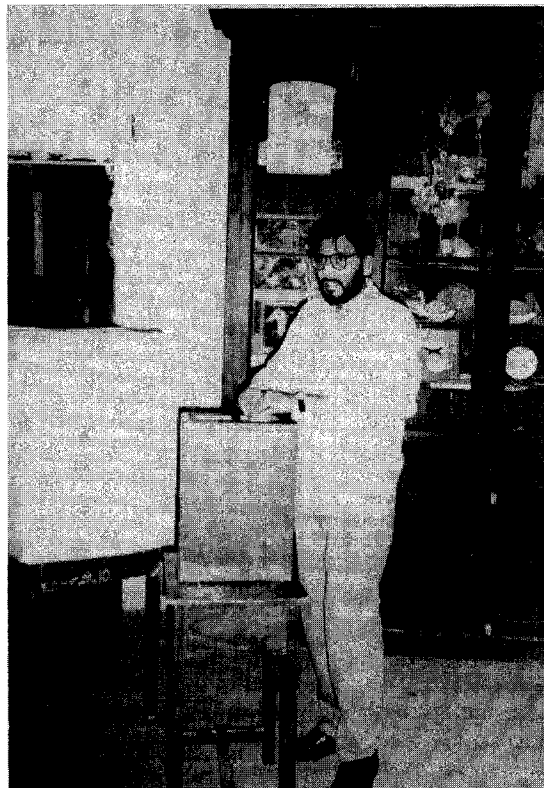
He paused, and said reluctantly, “No, it is not a wise decision. It is not a far-sighted decision, but what can we do? There are no alternatives now. It is only a hasty decision, appealing just to the emotions of people.”

“If you were the leader of the movement, what would you do? What would be your strategy?” I queried.

He laughed. “If I were leader! If I were leader, I would use this opportunity of elections to turn the elections into a referendum for the issue of Uttarakhand. I would get our four representatives elected into Parliament, so that they could begin to influence policy from inside. Instead, we are giving up our power of the vote, and in doing so, we are casting a vote for whomever eventually wins.”

The USS mandate to boycott the elections created a serious dilemma for those who believed in the Uttarakhand movement. We saw several of our friends torn between the desire to exercise their right to vote, and the emotional wish to show solidarity with the movement. In the end, far more people than expected in Uttarakhand did cast votes, sending a signal that democracy was the most important means of voicing opinion. Although the figures were contested, local news reports stated that 60 percent of the Uttarakhand population voted — a percentage that is higher than even the national voter turnout.

In Mussourie, the voting booths were located in a local school. Each booth was managed by several men who handed out ballots. I pulled out my camera (in



A friend drops his ballot in the box

front of the men at the table) to take a picture of a friend as he dropped his ballot into the box. As soon as my flash went off, I heard shouts and found myself surrounded by a group of angry men yelling that it was forbidden to take pictures. “But there are always pictures in the paper of the dignitaries dropping their ballots into the box,” said one bystander in my defense. Another discussion ensued, after which I was told threateningly that for my own safety, I should not use the picture in any local newspapers. I meekly agreed, and was allowed to leave, film and camera intact. Ironically, in the next issue of *Time* magazine that covered the Indian elections, I found a close-up shot of a woman voter as she *actually marked the party of her choice*. So much for rules.

The next days were consumed with following the voting results. Young and old men and women discussed the possible outcomes of the elections with vigor. I remember one evening seeing two old men, their white beards long and flowing and Nehru caps on their heads, walking slowly up the hill nicknamed Heart Attack Hill for its steep grade. Leaning heavily on their canes, between gasps of breath, they exchanged views. “Rao will have to resign, it will be Vajpayee (the Bharatiya Janata Party leader) as the next Prime Minister,” said one. “*Are yar*, have some faith in our country! The BJP will not win. They will be overtaken by the National Front-Left Front combine. *Dekho*, it will be V.P. Singh ruling our country again.”

At lunch time, people would crowd around the nearest

“When I don’t take a decision, it’s not that I don’t think about it. I think about it and take a decision not to take a decision.”

Outgoing Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, defending his reputation for indecisiveness

television to watch the latest results of the voting. Unlike the U.S., where computerization makes polling results available within an evening, here the process continues over a full week, building suspense, providing numerous opportunities to predict results and root for one’s favorite candidate. When highly controversial figures like Laloo Prasad Yadav, the Chief Minister of Bihar and the President of the Janata Dal Party, came on the screen, chants were raised: “La-loo! La-loo *bhai!*” Non-admirers would retort, “*Chee*, don’t say that! He must not be allowed to come to power.” Arguments then started between his defenders and accusers, citing Laloo’s involvement in the multi-crore animal husbandry scandal, his charisma or his knowledge of the issues of backward classes, being from one himself. In the middle, someone would chime in — to peals of laughter — with one of the many Laloo slogans: “*Jab tak samosa me aloo hai, tab tak Bihar me Laloo hai!*” (“As long as there are potatoes in samosas, there will be Laloo in Bihar!”)

This year, exit polls were conducted for the first time and broadcast on television. Viewers were treated to interviews with colorful politicians, one-liners that professional comics would find hard to match, and Hindi-and-English interviewer teams that alternated asking questions in the two languages. Party representatives or candidates interviewed at the polling booths would blatantly exaggerate their party’s progress in the elections, bragging that they would win all the seats in the state (even though they may not have won a single seat as yet) and ruthlessly bad-mouthing other parties. I suppose politics is politics no matter where you are in the world.

Comments in the newspapers from party representatives, however, made the television interviews seem like royal civility. An All-India Congress Party representative (the pre-election ruling party) was quoted in the *Times of India* as acidly saying: “The people of this country are fully aware of the sinister designs of the BJP, which seeks to destroy the social and political fabric of our existence and will, in this election, once again foil the game plan of the BJP.” The same day, a BJP representative said, “[P.V. Narasimha Rao’s] wild and bizarre statements are not the utterances of a political opponent but the fevered rantings of a leader of a party whose days are numbered. Today his rantings are comparable to those of a scared man — scared by the certainty of losing the trappings of the office that are essential to cover his sins of omission and commission.”

The fight for control of the Parliament was essentially

among three primary groups: Congress (I), the BJP (right-wing Hindu party), and the pro-minorities National Front-Left Front Coalition (of which the largest party is the Janata Dal). There was both anticipation and dread from different sections of voters that the BJP would win this election. By capitalizing on or creating (depending on who you ask) increasing Hindu-Muslim tensions, the BJP has ridden the waves of Hindutva — its slogan for Hindu nationalism — and has seen an incredible rise in power in the last decade. In 1984, the BJP had only two Lok Sabha seats; in the last 1991 elections, that figure had risen to 154 seats (and would rise to 194 seats in this election!). The BJP’s recent attempts to soften its pro-Hindu image by citing itself as a nationalist rather than communalist party are viewed with suspicion by many Muslims. Even though some do consider Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP’s Prime Ministerial candidate, to be left of the BJP center, others warn that Vajpayee’s liberal image is “little more than a media creation.” In the end, they assert, Vajpayee will still be bound by the BJP manifesto that promises to disband the Minorities Commission and amend Article 30 of the Constitution, which gives special status to religious and linguistic minorities.

The Congress Party, the ruling party of every government but two since Independence, was predicted to be the biggest loser of the 1996 elections. Tainted by corruption, by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao’s reputation for indecisiveness, and by its attempts to please all and in the process please none, Congress seemed to be losing support like a popped balloon loses air. Congress’s call for a “secular government” was viewed as a weak attempt to convince Muslims that the historically Congress-held Muslim votes should stay with that party, in spite of accusations that Congress is merely using minority populations with no real commitment to improving their status. Other parties had been actively building support among minority communities, while Congress rested on its laurels of historical support from these communities. Specific examples of support-building among minorities include the Janata Dal in Bihar, which successfully courted the state’s Muslims (approximately 15 percent of Bihar’s population) through a combine with the SP, or the BSP in Uttar Pradesh, which fielded 23 Muslim candidates for Lok Sabha seats in this election versus 12 in the 1991 election.

The NF-LF appeared to have a lot of opportunity. They were against the liberalization of India’s foreign-investment policies and pro-poor. On the other hand,



their party was already a coalition of several small parties with differing views on certain issues. To pull these groups together and to provide voters with a coherent picture of what they would be getting was sure to be a formidable task.

People's opinions about who would win were varied. Some could not care less, convinced that politics by nature is worthless. Most believed that some sort of coalition government would emerge. Some believed that Congress would somehow pull another magic trick out of its pocket that would allow it to maintain power. Some believed that the BJP would come to power. It was truly an election where anything was possible.

THE RESULTS

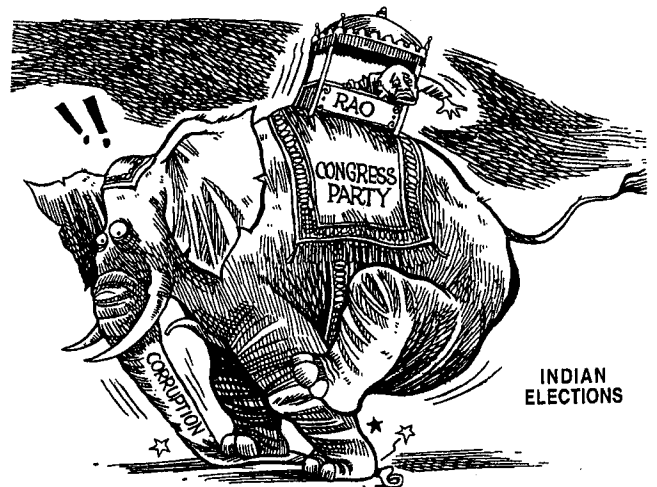
As the results trickled in, no clear majority seemed to be emerging. The only consensus was that Congress was finished (a consensus that would prove later to be incorrect). Of all the parties, Congress was hemorrhaging, losing seats as quickly as blood flows from an open wound. In the end, the results showed a truly divided electorate. The largest vote blocks that emerged in the final Lok Sabha tally were: 194 BJP (including the RSS and its allies), 139 Congress (including allies), 44 Janata Dal, and 53 Left Front. The BJP's 194 seats were still a big 72 seats short of the 266 that would be required for a simple majority. It is important to note that although the BJP won 194 electoral seats, it only won about 20 percent of the actual vote, hardly close to any kind of a mandate.

None of the commentators or analysts knew what to expect, as there is no constitutional protocol that governs the President's actions in the event of a hung Parliament. Would President Sharma invite the BJP, as the single

largest party, to form a provisional government and give them 30 days to garner majority support? Would the BJP be able to form alliances with regional parties in the next 2-3 days and gain enough seats to claim an outright majority? Would some sort of coalition emerge?

Narasimha Rao resigned his post as Prime Minister, but was promptly selected as Congress Party President. Ironically, despite losing more than 40 percent of its seats (going from 232 seats in 1991 to its present 136 seats), Congress seemed to be in a strong position: in order for the NF-LF or any other party to achieve a majority, they would have to obtain Congress support.

Many anti-BJP people I talked to seemed resigned to the fact that the BJP would end up governing the coun-



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try. During the voting period, I had asked my Muslim Hindi teacher how she would feel if the BJP were to come to power. "All my father's relatives told him to leave during Partition," she had said. "He didn't want to leave, but his relatives were going, so finally he decided he too would go. He got his ticket, and was on the platform to board the train when he decided that he would not leave his home. India is where he was born, and India is where he wanted to stay. He threw away his ticket to Amritsar, and instead boarded a train to Mussourie. We have been here since. Now we are being told that India is only for Hindus. This is what the BJP is saying to us. How can we want them in power?"

After the BJP emerged as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha, I asked her again how she felt. She did not answer me immediately, and then said, "Perhaps it will be good. They are intelligent people. What a party does or says in order to get into power is different than what they do or say in order to stay in power. Once the BJP is in power, it is their responsibility to keep all Indians (Hindus and Muslims) satisfied. And not enough people have voted for them to give them a simple majority, so maybe they will see that they must work to serve all people, not just Hindus. Not even all the Hindus have voted for them." I understood that her only choice was to hope for the best.

There were still those who believed that the NF-LF Combine would come to power, although it was far from clear who would be Prime Minister if this were to happen. Laloo Prasad did not do as well as expected in his home state of Bihar, and was no longer a candidate for Prime Minister. V.P. Singh, a former Prime Minister (and Finance Minister in Rajiv Gandhi's Cabinet), was thought to be a possibility although on television, Singh consistently stated he was not interested in this role. Instead, Singh nominated Jyoti Basu (the Chief Minister of Bengal, and President of the Communist Party of India — Marxist). Basu declined, much to the relief of many non-party members who feared the policies of and reaction to a Communist Party Prime Minister.

It was during this time that I read an article in *Time* magazine about the elections. In the table of contents, the article was captioned "India: They Call This an Election?" The subcaption went on to summarize the article (and the election) as follows:

"The world's biggest democracy braces for a selection process featuring more than 14,000 candidates, nearly 600 million voters, camels for toting ballot boxes and parrots squawking party slogans. When it's over, will the country get leadership — or confusion?"

Perhaps the authors spent a little too long watching the camels and parrots, rather than understanding the significance of this election. The sarcastic tone of this tag-line overlooks the strength of India's democracy and the power of the voters. Regardless of how powerless the "economically poor" may seem in this country,

those who vote understand the power of their votes in democratic India. Perhaps the authors should have been reminded that 55-60 percent of India's eligible population voted, compared to 35-40 percent of the American public.

Nor was the Indian electorate timid about giving emphatic judgments to those politicians who had forgotten that they were accountable to someone — the voter. Two specific examples come to mind. First, a *Times of India* opinion poll conducted a week before the election showed that 30 percent of voters said that they thought that Congress' main achievement was "nothing." Voters translated that opinion into action by voting Congress out of a third of its previously held seats. Second was the complete devastation of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha and her ruling party, the AIADMK. The Tamilian voters — tired of Jayalalitha's flagrant excesses (such as spending crores of rupees on her foster-son's wedding, including using government workers and funds to prepare the site and roads), her enormous ego (exhibited when she made one of her party's candidates for the Lok Sabha stand on a stool as she introduced him from her air-conditioned van), and myriad allegations of corruption — threw her out unceremoniously, giving her party not even a single seat in the Lok Sabha.

FORMING A GOVERNMENT

On May 16, President Sharma invited the BJP, as the party with the largest electoral block of seats, to form the government. Sharma gave the BJP ten days to form a majority and retain power of the government. The BJP accepted, and Atal Behari Vajpayee was sworn in as Prime Minister, along with his cabinet. On May 29, a no-confidence motion was to be taken. If the BJP could not obtain majority support by this time, it would lose power.

In the meantime, realizing that a BJP government was far from a sure thing, the NF-LF began to consolidate its power into a larger block. Drawing in regional parties, the NF-LF formed the United Front (UF), comprising 13 parties. However, the UF was still short of a simple majority. The UF declared, by consensus, the surprise choice of Karnataka Chief Minister, Deve Gowda, as its Prime Minister should the UF come to power. The UF government would be "pro-poor" said Gowda after his election by UF leaders. Perhaps — but its most immediate goal seemed to be to keep the BJP out of power, a goal that was bringing together parties with disparate views on major issues.

The UF also began discussions with its pre-election enemy — Congress — the party that the UF members had vilified, the party whose policies contained fundamental differences from many of the individual party stands in the UF. Congress had refused from beginning to form a coalition government with the UF, but agreed to support a UF government "from the outside." In supporting the UF government from the outside,



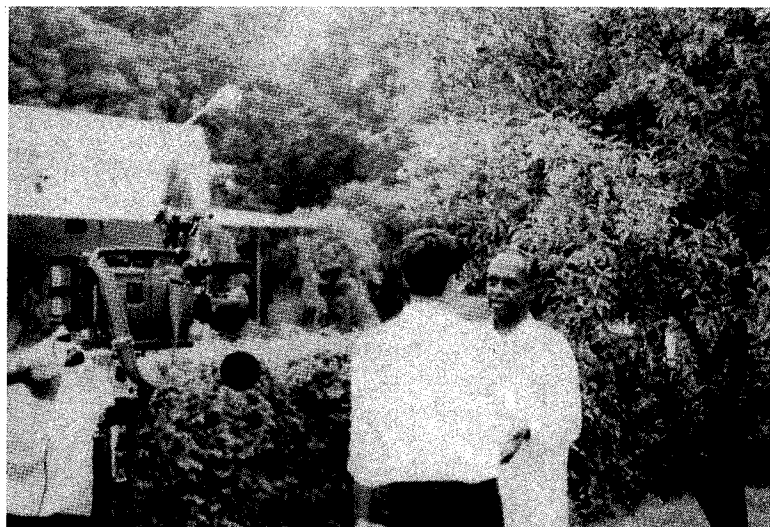
BJP Headquarters, Delhi

Congress would have leverage over the UF, and could threaten to pull its support at any time. In terms of political power, this accomplishes two things for Congress: first, it allows Congress to have essentially a “remote-control button,” as one local newspaper described it; and second, it protects Congress’s credibility if the UF government makes unpopular decisions or if it falls altogether. This situation was the best of the options available to Congress, given that Congress — having lost as many seats as it did — would have been unable to garner enough support had it tried to lead any coalition itself.

The UF’s acceptance of Congress support had an immediate negative impact on the group’s credibility. The pre-election stands taken by the NF-LF and the other

parties that comprised the UF were, in some ways, diametrically opposed to Congress’s stands (most notably on liberalization). To many of its die-hard followers, the UF’s willingness to be bed-partners with Congress was indicative of how a desire for political power overshadowed a commitment to certain stands with which voters had identified. A second problem was the odd situation created in which several of the parties in the UF combine were actually still fighting Congress at local levels, but supporting Congress at the center!

A week before the no-confidence motion on the BJP government was to take place, my husband and I visited the BJP and Janata Dal headquarters in Delhi. The BJP headquarters is on a broad, tree-lined street in the heart of New Delhi, on Ashoka Road where the vibra-



BJP General Secretary, Mr. Govindacharya, giving a TV interview

tions of political power seem particularly strong. A big sign was posted outside the headquarters, and just inside the gates, several armed guards eyed us curiously. We walked past a small bookshop with a glass case, where BJP propaganda was displayed: a thick document on the BJP's view of the mosque-destruction incident at Ayodhya, the 1996 BJP Election Manifesto, a big poster titled "Advani speaks back about the Hawala charge-sheeting" (Advani, the BJP President, was charged in the Hawala corruption scandal in which merchants doing business with the government made huge contributions to politicians). To the left was the entrance to the main building. Inside the lobby, several people were sitting and waiting, and several others were crowded around the receptionist. Above the reception desk were huge, garlanded pictures of Advani and Vajpayee.

We were directed to speak with Mr. Govindacharya, the BJP's General Secretary. We walked outside to another building in the back, and in the small garden in front of this building found Govindacharya in front of several TV cameras. He was dressed in immaculate white *kurta* and *dhoti*, his graying, curly hair reflecting the evening sun. Reporters were questioning him about what the BJP would do between now and the end of the month to gain its majority.

"You are not making deals with any parties; how will you win?" asked the reporter.

Govindacharya righteously replied: "In politics at times, people have to take a unilateral stand for betterment of the nation. We believe that more dialogue and less confrontation will be good for the country." He raised his hands in greeting to signal the end of the interview, and turned to greet several party members who had walked up. They huddled away from the crowds for a few minutes, and then walked back towards the building. Govindacharya was busy, about to attend a meeting with Vajpayee, but agreed to give us a few minutes.

"If there is one thing you would want the outside world to know about the BJP, what would it be?" Alan asked him.

Govindacharya straightened up, and pronouncing each word distinctly, replied in his best rhetoric: "A new leaf has been turned over in this country's politics." He went on to describe the BJP's commitment to changing the way that politics has been done till now.

I asked him how he is going to convince his Muslim voters that they should vote for the BJP, given that the BJP's main slogan is for propagation of Hindutva.

"Hindutva is no way in conflict with secularism," he replied, as if giving a lecture. "Secularism is a concept from the West born out of a reaction to the papacy." He could have been (and probably was) quoting from Vajpayee's 1992 speech on "Secularism: The Indian Concept." He continued, "Hindutva is a posi-

tive concept. Hindutva is the quintessence of Indian nationalism. We believe in equal treatment for all castes and religions, and that is how we will conduct our government."

Govindacharya's words about Hindutva and secularism not being in conflict sounded good, but I wish I had had a chance to press him more. If it is really true, I wanted to ask, why in the BJP Election Manifesto, is there a promise to construct only a "magnificent Shri Rama Mandir at Janmasthan in Ayodhya." Why did Vajpayee, as Prime Minister, continue to voice support for the building of a temple at the disputed Ayodhya site even though the matter is currently before the Allahabad High Court? Where is the commitment to the Muslims who suffered in the Ayodhya tragedy?

"What about the single Muslim BJP Minister who feels miffed at being given a 'lowly' post as Minister of Urban Affairs and Employment?" I asked him. (Privately, I marveled that this would be considered a lowly post — two of the most significant issues that India is facing could be powerfully addressed with someone who understood their importance. But perhaps the disdain with which this Ministry is viewed explains why our cities remain as they are, and our employment situation remains bleak.) Bhakt, the newly named Minister of Urban Affairs and Employment, had been sulking; he had not shown up for work in the five days since being named Minister.

"Yes, this we are dealing with," said Govindacharya. "That is an internal affair that must be handled." He closed up, not about to disclose the information that would come out the next day: that Bhakt had been placated with the high-profile Ministry of External Affairs portfolio.

What about foreign investment? "We oppose hegemony of any kind," Govindacharya stated. "Foreign investment is needed in certain sectors and not in others. The previous government was absolutely oblivious to this fact." This, again and as expected from any good Party Secretary, was a summary of what is contained in the 1996 Manifesto. It is the essential argument of "microchips *vs.* potato chips" as the debate is often coined here. Govindacharya did not expand on the BJP's attitude towards the United States, but the 1996 Manifesto clearly states the following:

"Our relations with the USA will be based on mutual respect and a congruence of interests. We note, however, that US policy for this region continues to suffer from lack of vision and that it disregards India's political and security interests."

By this time, we had stretched our few minutes into almost ten minutes, and we were about to lose the General Secretary. "Will you keep your majority?" I asked in parting.

"Of course," he said confidently. "We will, and we



will change the country.”

Ready to go to the Janata Dal headquarters, we realized we did not know where it was. Our driver went to ask the armed guards inside the BJP compound, and returned with one of them carrying a menacing-looking huge rifle over his shoulder. He got in the car, and explained that he would show us the way. With a gun's muzzle in our face, we were a little apprehensive but he seemed like a mild enough fellow. On the way to the Janata Dal, we asked him if he was a BJP supporter. He shook his head: “No, madam, I am just a government servant. Whoever comes to power, I serve them.” But after a little prodding, he added, “I do *want* the BJP to stay in power. Why? We need a change. Congress has not done anything for us.” A familiar refrain, it seemed.

The Janata Dal headquarters was in sharp contrast to the BJP headquarters. Instead of one whole building to itself, the Janata Dal was in one small section of a building. The sign outside the building was battered, bent and fading. The building itself looked like it has had its share of wear and tear. A sign directly above the Janata Dal entrance said “Pest Control of India.” We presumed that it indicated the building was shared by another company, rather than that the JD was controlling pests like the BJP.

We entered a gloomy small lobby. On the left side, stairs curved up. In the middle of the tiny space, a man lay flat on the floor on his back, eyes closed and mouth open. Somebody came in after us and tried to wake

him, first by shaking his arm, and when that elicited no response, by actually slapping his face. We were just beginning to get worried that the man was dead, when he closed and opened his mouth and then turned on his side, still asleep.

At that moment, a group of three men came walking down the stairs. Again, we were lucky. The man in the center, with his well-oiled hair and neatly trimmed mustache, was Mr. Ramesha Chandra Ratna, the National Secretary of the Janata Dal. With him was Mr. Sanjay Sachdev, the official spokesman for the JD. They agreed to speak with us, and we spent about 20 minutes with them on the steps of the headquarters, while a group of men behind us argued loudly about the party's strategy and leadership.

“Ours will be a people's government,” said Ratna in response to a question of mine about the main difference he would like to make clear between the BJP and the NF-LF (now United Front).

“But how do we, the people, know it is a people's government?” I asked. “Everybody is saying that they are for the people.”

“The BJP is not a people's government,” he replied. “We are about people, they are about temples. The BJP Prime Minister is defending the demolition of Babri Masjid. It is evidence of their bad intentions.”

I asked them how they respond to those people who say they have given up their principles by accepting



Janata Dal Headquarters, Delhi

support from the Congress Party. "You obviously stood for something different from Congress before the elections, otherwise you would have formed an alliance with Congress before the voting. Now, in joining with Congress, some say that you are giving up your principles just in order to get power. What do you say to those people?"

Ratna was silent for a moment and then replied,

"There are so many circumstances at this time, and we are thinking about these things." I laughed openly at his "non-answer," and was rewarded by smiles from Sachdev and Ratna. They knew what the issues were.

My husband Alan followed up my question with another: if new elections had to be held, would they enter into an alliance with Congress prior to the elections? Ratna and the third man both shook their heads emphatically, but Sachdev immediately interrupted and said, "This we will address when we come to that situation. At this point, the Party does not have an official statement on this matter."

Of course, we said to ourselves. In other words, they were saying principally, they wouldn't hook up with Congress, but when it comes to taking power, principles do not mean much.

FORMING A GOVERNMENT....AGAIN

The BJP government did fall, only 13 days after it was formed, giving it the dubious distinction of being the government in power for the shortest amount of time in Indian history. In fact, the no-confidence motion never even came to pass because, aware that he would not be able to garner sufficient support, Vajpayee submitted a letter of resignation to the President several hours before the planned motion. Why the BJP decided to take power when it was likely that it would fall short of the required seats is a question that lingers in many people's minds. The argument that seems to make the most sense is that the BJP did not know, at the time that it accepted the challenge of forming the government, that Congress had already given its unconditional support (from the outside) to the NF-LF. The BJP's plan might have been to try and divide Congress, or to garner support of several of the regional parties that ended up joining the UF. It is also possible that the BJP leaders felt that they had no alter-



Ramesha Chandra Ratna (second from left) and Sanjay Sachdev (fourth from left) at the JD Headquarters

native. If they had not taken power, they would have been blamed by those who voted for them for shirking their responsibility. To know the real impact of the BJP's short run in power and Vajpayee's subsequent resignation (that came before the no-confidence motion), we will have to wait until the next elections. However, it is clear that the BJP has established itself as a major player in Indian politics for many years to come. In addition, Vajpayee seems to have kept his sense of dignity, and the respect of even his opposition leaders who focused on tearing his party to shreds but leaving him whole.

Deve Gowda will be sworn in as Prime Minister of the country on June 1, the first Prime Minister from a backward class, and his government only the third non-Congress government in India's political history. President Sharma gave the UF until June 12 to prove a majority in the Lok Sabha. With Congress support from the outside, the UF will be able to stay in power, but it will be a government that is precariously balanced and constantly trying to keep Congress happy. The UF has not, as yet, emerged with a consistent political strategy of its own. In fact, the only thing it has said is that it does not plan to change the Rao government's liberalization program (not surprising, given that Deve Gowda, in his previous incarnation as Chief Minister of Karnataka State, was known for opening his arms wide to foreign investment) — a statement that makes the businesses happy, and many party supporters, who are anti-liberalization, very unhappy.

Rao is still not finished either. The Times of India quoted a Congress Working Committee member as saying, "No move in the formation of the new government can be made without [Rao's] nod." One of my politics-loving friends believes that Congress will keep its support of the UF only until the next state elections in UP and Bihar (to be held in the upcoming year).

Then, he predicts, Congress will play its trump card — pulling its support from the central UF government, so that it falls and is unable to use its central power to get its local candidates elected.

Although the UF will probably stay in power for now, it faces a long, hard road ahead. Trying to keep 13 different parties united toward the same goal, while simultaneously worrying about Congress's commitment, is a task that seems certain to tax Prime-Minister-to-be Gowda's patience, talents and leadership skills. In the meantime, with the uncertainty of the lasting power of Deve Gowda's government, all parties are bound to continue trying to form new alliances and collusions in the event that new elections are held. Just last week, the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (of U.P. ex-Chief Minister Mayawati fame) announced that it would join with the Congress Party in U.P....and this after the BSP's recent disastrous alliance in U.P. with Congress arch-rival, the BJP. In the end, it is always about politics and numbers.

Whatever games continue, however, there is no downplaying the importance of this election and its results. After decades of dynastic, and at the minimum, "aristocratic" leadership, we finally have a Prime Minister who hails from a backward class, a Prime Minister who promises to install a Cabinet that is *not* made up of Brahmins and Thakurs, a Prime Minister whose English sounds "rustic" (according to The Times of India) and who does not even speak the national language (Hindi). Can he begin to represent the vast majority of the masses that has been left unrepresented and neglected? Can he implement "trickle-up development" instead of the "trickle-down economics" of the past, where the "trickle" seems to have stopped with the richest five percent of the population? Or will he too succumb to the power games of politicians, and forget the ordinary Indian, the supposed beneficiary of the great democratic system? □