

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-23

Congress: Cracks in the Wall

Pragjotishpur  
Gauhati, Assam  
India  
January 22, 1958

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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The site of the 63rd annual session of the Indian National Congress was a great stretch of dusty land close by the River Brahmaputra in the valley of Assam. A temporary town, named Pragjotishpur for an ancient Assamese kingdom, was laid out, with new roads, electric lights and bamboo barracks. From a forest of flagstuffs fluttered the saffron-white-and-green colors of the party. At the main gate stood a statue of Gandhi. Inside the pandal, the great shady meeting-tent, up on the cushioned dais, sat Prime Minister Nehru, and with him Cabinet ministers and party highest-ups, the leaders of the party and the nation. The 4000 delegates sat listening on the canvas-over-straw-covered ground. Behind them, in that pandal set for 50,000, were only a few hundred spectators.

Mr. Nehru looked out, then turned to the Congress President, U.N. Dhebar, and asked if there weren't some popular speaker who could speak Assamese or Bengali. The next two speakers were a Bengali and an Assamese. Though their voices boomed out by loudspeaker over the convention grounds outside, there was no noticeable increase in attendance. The meeting continued.

A year ago, the Congress session at Indore was a pre-election pep rally. Then, this organization which led India's march toward Independence and has directed the nation in the ten years since, was full of confidence, looking forward to receiving the public approval that would mean a five-year extension in office. The Congress won the elections handily, but there were some disquieting losses. Especially, there was the defeat in Kerala.

This year, the Congress has met in a less cheery mood. India is having troubles: foreign exchange, food, and (Mr. Nehru's phrase) "fissiparous tendencies."

The Second Five-Year Plan has sprung a leak in its second year: there is a foreign-exchange gap that will be difficult to close, even with foreign assistance. Recurrent food shortages have created human distress and drained finances unexpectedly. The question is rising, Was the First Plan, the "Food Plan," a success after all? Food production in India remains among the lowest per acre in the world. Then there has been this past year a cropping-out of violent disputes: a half-mad anti-Brahmin campaign and bloody inter-caste riots in the South, a disruptive Hindu-vs.-Sikh antagonism over language in the Punjab, and a fiery we-want-an-oil-refinery agitation in Assam.

From a purely party point of view, the Indian landscape is scattered with some disturbing sights too. The Communists are in power in Kerala and show no signs of weakening. In local elections around the country, Congress candidates have met with increasingly frequent defeat. Open-air squabbles in intra-party elections in three States have required the Congress High Command in New Delhi to send a peace-maker to the scene. On the lower levels of the party, in the districts, where Congressmen used to "serve the people," there is, hazily, a growing indifference and indiscipline.

Most perplexing, there is a waning public confidence in the Congress, increasing disappointment with it.

This is recognised by thoughtful Congress leaders and it was reflected in the agenda of the Gauhati session. The business of Gauhati, according to Congress President Dhebar, was twofold: to "reaffirm" party policies and programs for national development, as usual, but also to discuss proposed changes in the party constitution designed to restore organizational "touch with the grass roots." The convention spent five days on the first item, and the sixth and final morning on the second.

Congress representatives from throughout the country talked, listened (more so), passed six resolutions, and approved the constitutional changes. The most publicized convention decision was to delay until after 1965 the replacement of English by Hindi as India's official language---this a concession to the non-Hindi-speaking South, which has been making disgruntled noises. Another, hopeful resolution included a 12-point program to increase food production by lowering irrigation rates, constructing minor water channels, encouraging the use of better seeds and green manures, and the like. For the most part, however, the resolutions covered oft-travelled ground. In international affairs there were "grave world tensions" and the threat of "atomic destruction." Goa remained as "colonialism on the soil of India." In land reforms "much still remains to be done..." In educational reconstruction there was still the "urgent need for introducing far-reaching changes..."

More than ever in the past ten years, they said, Mr. Nehru dominated the session. He spoke for a total of ten or twelve hours, intervening in the discussion with those rambling, school-masterly lectures of his. He preached gradualism and moderation, while trying to infuse ambition and confidence. Now and again he flashed impatience with "defeatists." His main point: "There will be no retreat from socialism" as India's goal.

But Mr. Nehru's remarks served better to paper-over the cracks in the Congress wall than to fill in the chinks. India, he said, has no problem which it cannot and will not solve. "If anybody tells me that [the Plan] is too ambitious involving too many difficulties, well, I will say I am ambitious and am going to be more ambitious in the future, because WE ARE MADE THAT WAY!" Mr. Nehru, like no one else, provided inspiration, but will it be enduring enough to help solve the enduring practical problems?

Cabinet ministers and Chief Ministers of various States echoed and embellished. For all the delegates assembled---and for all the 4.5 million Indians who are four-anna (five cent) members of the Congress---the party is more and more a top-level show. There did not appear to be

much exchange of ideas between the big leaders on the dais and the little leaders sitting before them on the ground. Interrupting, an occasional groundling would mount the platform to complain, but only to be followed by a more powerful and prestigious higher up with a permanent place on the platform, who would come in, wave-like, and wash over the interrupting foot-print. And no one can say No to Nehru. No one wants to.

In all, like that too-empty pandal, there was for me a too-empty feeling about Gauhati, about what wasn't done, about what isn't being seen by the Congress. This has to do with the state of the party and the state of the nation, and with the future of a country in which the gap between expectation and fulfillment is becoming wider and more recognisable. It has to do also with the Communist Party of India, which watches and waits, and now, with a new clarity, knows what it is doing.

The Congress was founded in Bombay in 1885 by several English and Anglicised Indian gentlemen as a polite liberal reform pressure group. When the among-us-gentlemen approach of petition and persuasion brought scant results, the Congress took a more aggressive line, and within 20 years was calling plainly for Indian self-rule.

It was Gandhi, bringing his remarkable method, his organizational and propagandistic genius, who made the Congress the leader of the mass nationalist movement that swept broadly forward toward independence.

The Congress was always a diverse group. The leaders were doctors and lawyers, manufacturers and religious reformers, traders and publishers, and among them were differences over how to achieve independence and what to do with it: there were violent-revolutionaries and peaceful-evolutionists, secularists and religious revivalists, economic planners and free-enterprisers. The followers, workers in the towns, peasants in the villages, came from a different world, grasped the general idea and longed for a particular future. The Congress contained all these differences of background and viewpoint, yet was united, under Gandhi, for Independence' sake.

By the mid-'30's, the Congress operated a sort of parallel government to that of the British. Congressmen wore homespun khadi to boycott British mill cloth and bolster Indian cottage industry, experimented with educational reform, small-scale industries and local self-rule. Their ideas and activities seemed to point the way vaguely toward the sort of social, political and economic changes that would follow political independence. But the Congress also heard and voiced the mass public complaint against the British rule, and basically the adhesive of the independence movement was a negative substance. First, the British must leave.

When Independence came, the oppositional, agitational Congress became overnight the operational, governmental Congress. Despite the pre-Independence practice in provincial and interim national government, the Congress has found running India is more difficult than running the British out of India.

There have been problems all along---Kashmir, canal waters, integration of States---but they have been the sort that unified the public. The present problems are the kind that pull apart.

For the mass of people, living close to the subsistence level, the hope of Independence in the British days was the hope of a better way of living, conceived in modest, tangible terms: relief from the extortions of rent-collector and police, security on the land, the means to grow a little more food and have a little more cloth and have a little better shelter.

Since Independence patriotism has been lending a general public feeling of well-being, but nowadays particular personal dissatisfaction is on the increase.

For so many there has been no real, visible improvement in the way of living in the past ten years. There is a growing feeling that this Indian government---this Congress government---has not done well by "me."

There have been advances in these first ten years of freedom: new factories and dams, roads and railroads, ports, more electricity and schools, more buses and bicycles. For many there is now the feeling of freedom, new opportunity, release from restriction by class and caste.

But there are problems that wear at the public in person. The poor are still poor. Real per capita income in India has declined in the past five from about \$57 a year to \$53. India is under-fed. It does not yet grow enough food, though bumper crops in '54-'55 led to the wishful assumption that the food problem had been solved. Today in parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh there is famine. Land reforms, which diminished the biggest landlords, still leave the tiller harassed and insecure in many areas. Unemployment demoralizes the educated youth, and under-employment born of lack of resources dulls the initiative of townspeople and villagers. The educated scramble to gain, then ploddingly fulfill, jobs are clerks in government or business, but find little reward either in scribbling in a ledger-book or receiving the salary that disappears so fast. The rich, the owners of visible wealth, feel the tightening squeeze of taxes and foresee their own decline in the name of socialism. They resent and envy the newly prosperous government-contractors and importers who work their way around obstacles and into loopholes and are doing nicely. In all, there are relatively few individuals who identify themselves satisfactorily with what is going on in India.

On its part, the Government has been disappointed in the public---in the public failure to learn the knack or acquire the attitude of self-reliance and sacrifice. There has been widespread failure of villagers to rise to the do-it-yourself idea in economic and political development. There are too many demonstrations and strikes, and demands for wage increases, they feel. The outstretched give-me hand is appearing more frequently. If India is trying to raise itself by the bootstraps, why aren't more people pulling on the bootstraps?

The failure of the Congress to maintain touch with the grass roots and the failure of the public to respond to Congress leadership both lie in a difference of point of view. Being aloft, the national leaders---planners and rulers---see the nation as a State. The mass of people, not having the habit of thinking in such terms, look at India as self, family, village, district or linguistic province. Everybody is right.

Everybody has changed. The public has changed---not its lot so much as its new recognition of it. There is a new awareness of goals, which have been furnished largely by the Congress. People look to the Congress for leadership, but also for simple delivery.

And it is not the same old Congress. The phrase often used to describe the turnover of national government in 1947 is "the transfer of power." The Congress took the vacated British power, added it to its own popularity and prestige. Congressmen took office, sought office. The Congress movement became the Congress party. There was a change in personnel. More businessmen, ex-rulers, big landlords and other latter-day converts joined or contributed funds and sought influence. At the same time, purist Gandhians left Congress and politics for Good, and socialists and communalists, thwarted by Congress "capitalists" and "secularists," left and formed their own parties.

The Congress maintained itself, but there was a change in spirit. Was this what Gandhi foresaw when just before he died he proposed that the Congress leave politics and convert itself into a Lok Sevak Sangh, or People's Service Association, working outside the sphere of government?

That practical idealist Gandhi was gone now, and leading the Congress was the impractical realist Jawaharlal Nehru. There had been a goal, largely negative, as it was understood---Independence, Independence From---and now there had to be a new goal, which still should have been named Independence, Independence For. But that goal has never been precisely defined, even to the satisfaction of the imprecise Indian mind. There would be "reconstruction" and "development programs" but there was no clearly understood end-product, and no common uniting principle as in the days of the Independence movement.

In 1955 at its annual session held at Avadi near Madras, the Congress fixed "a socialist pattern of society" as the national goal. Last year at Indore this was modified to read "socialist cooperative commonwealth." This still permits a wealth of definitions.

Socialism is viewed in India generally not as State control of "the means of production and distribution" so that the "toiling masses" can throw off the "domination of their capitalist masters." Economically, socialism is conceived as a means of harnessing latent resources and employing them for increased production and more equitable distribution. But socialism is a matter of social and political as well as economic development, of vital as well as material improvement. Most thinking Indians describe themselves as socialists, and most political parties offer socialism in one form or another. Socialists can be democrats, but communists are not socialists though they are fellow-travellers part of the way. What Indian socialists mean by socialism is similar to what Americans mean by "the democratic way of life." Because of the desire for rapid development, the State takes the initiative and moves more quickly. It is economic development which is seen as the most pressing need. But nationalization of the Imperial Bank of India is only one aspect of socialism. State subsidy to millions of impoverished handloom weavers is socialism too, and so is the granting of free primary education and the formation of village councils.

Practically, in its approach to the socialist goal, the Congress has adopted the formula of "development on top, and let it percolate down." It has chosen modern industrialization as the driving wedge of national reconstruction. There has been allowance for social welfare, community development and village industries---much more so than in the Plans of totalitarian countries---but the primary emphasis has been on maximizing productive investment, conceived in conventional modern capital-formation terms. For this task there is a grievous lack of resources, both in savings and human talent.

But more fundamentally, there has been such a preoccupation with plans, models and mechanics of progress that there has been a blurring of the goal, of constant awareness of the fact that in a democratic country it is the citizens who are the purpose for which a government exists or any Plan is formulated. There has been a growing State-centered attitude on the part of the leaders, too much dazzlement by the modern West and by the rapid material gains of Russia's Five-Year Plans. Though it is denied, there is a desire to keep at least near-abreast of Communist China.

The Government's view of development is consequently project-happy. Food production is low: couldn't there be fewer "Grow More Food" posters and less talk of "production targets," and more assistance to farmers where they need it, namely in the field? Couldn't India defer building mammoth dams ("the highest straight-gravity dam in the world"), and use the cement instead to renovate old reservoirs and holding-walls that have fallen into disrepair? (In 1957, 60% of waters from new dams were unused because of the lack of field irrigation channels.) There is widespread unemployment in towns and cities: employment exchanges are built, but they can do little more than pass on the information that there are very few jobs available. India is woefully backward in production of fuel and power: an elaborate atomic energy establishment is set up, when most villagers have to burn cakes of dried cow-dung for fuel. In the city of Allahabad, a Rs 6 million (US\$ 1.26 million) railway station goes up, to replace the present crowded one, to be sure, while close-by tens of thousands live in mud-hut slums without safe drinking water or street sewerage.

Nation-building has been regarded too much in terms of buildings. In the welfare-vs.-production dialogue, it may be argued that these modernizing projects are long-range investments, and that some doing-without, some sacrifice is necessary now for the well-being of future generations. Even if we refrain from asking the moral question, there is still another: Is this good politics?

This then is the Government approach, and that of the Congress. At present the Congress is susceptible to no modifying influence. Regarding itself as the hero and heir of Independence, the Congress regards the Opposition as apostates. Nearly all political opponents are indeed ex-Congressmen, and they are regarded as having erred.

The Congress' view of itself as custodian of India has been enhanced by its awareness of the great contribution that the party has made since Independence in providing the nation with the several thousands of persons who legislate and administer the country along with the civil service. In a sense this has been a contribution to India and a deprivation of the Congress. For a Congressman to enter Government was a natural step, the path of duty, and of opportunity.

It has been natural also for many Indian public servants to enter not only into the offices and responsibilities left behind by the departing British, but their perquisites and bureaucratic-paternalistic attitudes as well. Much of this latter is visible. As public expectations are not being met---and I do not wish to imply that the Indian public are fully just or intelligent in their expectations---there is questioning of just how much real difference there is between the British "law and order" government and the "socio-economic development" Indian government. Among many, as a wag has pointed out, there is a growing suspicion that among

the lower-rung officials anyway, more are working for the socio-economic development of themselves. It is of no encouragement to the public and of no help to the Congress that Government administration these days has a lower reputation for honesty and efficiency than the British raj has in memory. Homespun khadi, once a mark of patriotism, is worn by many a politician these days as a mark of political respectability. But khadi-wearing is becoming regarded as slightly pharisaical, like praying loudly in public.

What of the old Congressmen who have not entered Government? They have remained outside and behind. In pre-Independence days there had been something to do and a reason to do it. For many, with the gaining of Independence the job was finished, and now "back to normalcy." The post-Independence mission has been taken over by Congress-as-Government, so what is left for Congress-outside-of-Government to do, except to win the elections every five years? There remains, as before, a "constructive program" for social service, but only little incentive there for the individual Congressman. Personal satisfaction and tangible reward are more readily acquired in the Government service. But even the Congress outsider knows the value of knowing the insider. Many a veteran Congressman hobnobs with an ex-colleague now in office, and he gets things done through him.

In all, it must be confusing to be an intelligent Congress Party-man these days. The party is democratic and tolerant, and inefficient and inexact, and it expects unity and discipline. Theoretically it wants to hear disagreement, but practically it doesn't want to have it. Aware of its tremendous tasks, it would rather have cheers than criticism, especially from its own kin. It thereby cuts itself off from seriously considering many specific complaints. This in turn creates dissatisfaction within the party and leaves scope for agitation to other political parties.

The recent case of the Assam oil refinery is an example. The Government of India announced last summer---on the decision of course of the Congress High Command---that the refinery to be built to process Assamese oil would be located in a neighboring State. In economically underdeveloped Assam, which contributes a great deal to the Indian economy by way of tea and timber and yet remains one of the two or three most backward States in the Union, there was an outburst of protest. Renegade Congressmen, publicly challenging the party decision, conducted a civil disobedience campaign, got themselves jailed, and aroused noisy public complaint. In the end, the Congress-Government agreed to place the refinery in Assam.

Now the Congress party leaders in Assam were just as anxious to take care of their State as anyone else, and unquestionably they argued their case with the Congress at the Center---but if so, privately. In the public mind it was the public agitation that won the case, and it was the dissident Congressmen who won the credit. (It is possible that the "dissident Congressmen" were actually the dissembling second prong of an Assam Congress pincers movement. But the public impression remains the same.) The man who was "first to be arrested" in the agitation, and is now a loyal Congressman again, said, "We were lucky that the Communists were so slow to join in on the refinery movement. Later we kept them from seizing it."

The moral of the episode: Congress had better find some way of quelling or satisfying discontent, while maintaining its integrity and respect.

Now, this is not all just grouchy old me. There is recognition of party trouble by a few at the Center. (I also plead that I am not simply inclining my ears toward these voices.)

The soul-searching began just after last year's general elections. Congress won easily, but there were some worrisome features. The scrap-ping for nominations exposed a remarkable lack of fraternal spirit and indeed threatened to rend some Provincial Congress Committees. Appeal to caste was a frequent consideration in nominations and campaigning. And some renowned party stalwarts were trounced at the polls.

Commenting on party weaknesses, President Dhebar saw a "loss of touch with the grass roots," blamed a "lack of character, a slipping back to the old ways." Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Union Minister for Communications who ran the election campaign, saw the Congress "losing care and devotion" and called Congressmen to "regain the old way of thinking." In the opinion of General Secretary Shriman Narayan, the chief trouble was "ideological confusion."

But there was no more pointed criticism than that of Mr. Nehru himself: "There can be no doubt that the Congress organization is suffering from a deep malaise...Have we become too stale, too complacent, not having enough touch with realities? Has success itself loosened the fiber which gave strength to Congress in the past?...Our discipline is weakening...[As leaders of India] we have thus a heavy responsibility. In discharging this responsibility we must remember that, above all, we have to maintain integrity of purpose, that we have often to subordinate ourselves to the larger good of the Congress and the country."

The general diagnosis is "lack of character," and there has been a heavy dose of platitude as remedy. Now, at Gauhati, either as a substitute or secondary diagnosis, it was disclosed that the Congress suffers from "failure to disseminate" party ideals to the populace. The new prescription, "reorganization," was presented at the convention. "It is necessary," said Shriman Narayan, "to overhaul the organization by making it essentially a constructive type of association of voluntary workers devoting themselves to specific items of social and economic reconstruction on the lines of Gandhiji's program."

The reorganization aims at getting the party to involve itself more fully in the villages and wards by making the mandal, an area with a population of 20,000, the basic Congress unit, in place of the district, with its population of several hundreds of thousands. There will be a semi-annual Mandal General Assembly to discuss problems of the locality, and an elected Mandal Congress Committee, which will be the "base" of the higher District, Provincial and All-India Congress Committees.

Further, the reorganization calls for the formation within the mandals of four kinds of teams of Congress workers: for agriculture, public works, village sanitation and education, and youth. In addition to enrolling Congress members and collecting contributions (the first two items on the program of activities), these teams are expected, variously, to cooperate with Community Project schemes, raise food production, set up new industries, open new schools, dig wells and hold study classes. These teams, it is hoped, will "assist us in putting flesh and blood in our organizational framework."

It may be that these low-level Congress teams, if they come into being,



will serve as the "vehicles of the new social order," as the party hopes. At the minimum, perhaps their formation will call the attention of Congressmen to what each active member is supposed to be doing all along, according to Article IV, b, vii of the party constitution, namely devoting regularly "a part of his time to some form of national, community or social service otherwise than for personal profit."

I do not think that much can be expected from the party reorganization.

On the eve of the Gauhati session, meanwhile, 15 young (under 40) ranking Congress members formed a "Ginger Group" to spice up the party and make it "a vital, living and thinking organism." The Group, since then re-named the "Congress Socialist Forum," included a Union Minister, a Deputy Minister and Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Mr. Nehru's politician daughter. In its thesis, the Forum declared its allegiance to Mr. Nehru, but found the party suffering from "total stultification and paralysis of all thinking." It warned against Communist on the Left and "vested interests and reactionary elements" on the Right, and recommended that the party undertake for itself "the necessary training and education in the principles and practices of socialism."

Mr. Nehru promptly dismissed the Ginger Group as "neither ginger nor group (laughter)." Reactions at Gauhati ranged from "Yes, let them have their say" to "The Congress is a forum. Why a forum inside the forum?"

Until the Group comes up with concrete proposals (it is supposed to hold a study camp this Spring), it seems content to remain coterie-sized and rather quiet. What will become of the Group remains to be seen, but it unlikely that it will alarm the Congress into new activity. Apropos, the present-day Socialists (the Praja Socialists and their schismatic fellows) emerged from such an inner group, the Congress Socialist Party, founded in 1934, whose leaders are now scattered all over the Indian political lot.

Unfortunately for itself, the Congress has not been able to attract the outstanding young people who can provide it with future leadership. Scratch a Congressman and there is a good chance that (if not a recent, adult recruit) he will turn out to have joined the party as a youth in 1921, at the time of Gandhi's first non-cooperation movement. He is old and tired now, and things are going all right. Congress is in office and all's well with the world. But the fact is that Congress is very short of up-and-coming leaders in the 40-55 age group. The same old faces return to high Congress office. Young men, the bright ones, as Mr. Nehru has said, are "among our most formidable opponents." For them, Congress is no longer respectable nor exciting.

As the Congress looks to the future, it continues to ask, "After Nehru, what?" The more pertinent question, "With Nehru, what?" is not being asked. And so at Gauhati the Congress "reaffirmed" but scarcely re-examined, it "reorganized" when it needs to rehabilitate.

If the Congress' troubles, as self-analysed, are complacency, indiscipline and lack of character, then perhaps little can be done, and the decline of the Congress may be attributed to "historical inevitability": the revolutionary party that couldn't remain young. Yet perhaps in the face of a threat to its supremacy, the party would regird itself.

What it might well do at the present time, as the Government, is to take a good portion of the resources available for national development and reallocate them to small-scale investment in agriculture, cottage industries and housing. This would be sound investment, economically and politically.

Personally, I would not have so much concern for the health of the Congress if there were strong democratic alternatives to the Congress. There are none. The democratic Socialists are split: the Praja Socialists wander about without firm leadership since Jayaprakash Narayan's retirement, and without distinguishing creed since Congress adopted a socialist goal; the "Dr. Lohia Socialists" revel in agitation and scatter their efforts and their good will under the direction of their willful leader. The communalists of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jana Sangh are passé ideologically. The regionalist parties may continue to gain strength, but their's is a march in the direction of national disintegration. The "non-political" Forum of Free Enterprise, backed by Biggest Business, has too laissez-faire an outlook to become widely acceptable, and the Sarvodaya movement, with its village-mindedness, turns its back on conventional politics.

This leaves the Communists, who welcome the current dissatisfaction. In both its agitational and parliamentary approaches, the Communist Party of India exploits the gap between Congress promise and performance, and portrays the Congress as a "bogus socialist party," "the bulwark of landlords and capitalists." Freed for a while, at least, from the Moscow-directed flip-flops of the Stalin era, Indian Communists can show a greater consistency and have a broader field of operation. They are a hopeful lot these days.

All this is not to imply that the Congress is on the way out. It is much too early to write the obituary of the party which did lead the nation to Independence, which does reflect the great body of opinion in India, which indeed holds two-thirds of the seats in the State Legislative Assemblies and three-fourths of the seats in the national Parliament. The Congress has been a tough, resilient organization.

And in this world of "easy-method," "rapid-development" totalitarian appeals, the Congress has a difficult, big-minded ideal for India. What the Congress leaders are trying to do is to build, within a generation, a modern democratic welfare State, providing the good life and creating a free society amidst an ignorant populace in a land having limited resources and often divided, at that, by antagonistic loyalties. Hats off.

There have been mistakes in planning and clumsiness in effecting the plans. There has been foot-dragging within the Congress and without. The States have moved much more slowly than the Center has wished they would.

All along in its history the Congress has had, as it is proud to say, "the cooperation of the masses." Lately there has been less cooperation, more---at the best---patience. India has a lot of patience. But it will be better if Congress can regain that old cooperation.