

# **ELECTION 1998**

**A PEOPLE'S CHARTER**



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## **Election 1998 : A People's Charter**

Mid-term election to the parliament confronts the people of India today. The people did not demand or desire the election. It was forced upon them.

Yet another December proved cataclysmic for the Indian political scene, though fortunately not bloody like the one of 1992. Then the whimsical Congress let down the people of India and compromised our entire democratic and secular framework. Five years later it let down not only the United Front but also the people who desired economic and political stability. Both actions were equally unprincipled and crotchety, results of internal factionalism. In both instances the people at large were betrayed, their will and desire treacherously and capriciously jeopardised.

The development did not surprise any one. It was inevitable. The United Front did not command a majority in the house. It was dependent on the support of the Congress 'from outside' for survival. This support was fickle and never stable. The withdrawal of support by the Congress pushed the United Front government into a minority. The council of ministers had no

choice but to resign and recommend the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. The minor surprise, if any, was the failure of the Bharatiya Janata Party to garner any support from other parties, groups or individuals in sufficient numbers despite open calls, enticements, promises and justifications of 'horse trading'. It spectacularly failed to break the United Front. The Congress too made some pathetic 'attempts' to form a government which no one took seriously.

## **The Crisis**

The immediate cause of the fall of the United Front government was the withdrawal of support by the Congress. The Congress had supported the government from outside, avowedly to keep the communal forces, viz., the BJP and its allies, away from power. The Congress took the decision to extend support to the United Front in May 1996 once it became clear that it had no chance to form or lead a government. The support was to be unconditional. It was ostensibly extended in national interest and in the name of principles, specifically secularism, not for any gains of its own. Soon afterwards the Congress had a new president. Mr. Sitaram Kesari has always seemed quite keen to bring the United Front government down, at the very least embarrass and humiliate it. He constantly threatened to do so. His success in forcing the United Front to change its Prime Minister once, from Mr. H. D. Devegowda to Mr. I. K. Gujaral, probably strengthened his delusions of grandeur. Powerless president of a party in severe decline, he desperately sought illusions of strength. Out of power at the centre and in most states the Congress and its president probably lost all traces of sagacity and sanity. Mr. Kesari gloried in the exhibition of his nuisance value. The other radicals and rebels in the party kept silent. Some others went a step further and opened a 'dialogue' with the BJP to help it form the new government. They had succeeded in such machinations in U.P. Fortunately they did not at the national level.

The decision of the Congress to withdraw support to the United Front government was politically irresponsible and morally unjustified. It plunged the country into a crisis, endangered the security of the people and gave the communal forces an uncalled for and early chance to make another bid for power.

The interim report of the Jain Commission appointed to inquire into the assassination of the former Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi became the excuse for the Congress to pull the rug. It was a flimsy and highly questionable cause. The report was interim. It came as a number of remarks that were not, due to the nature of the report, substantiated. The report had been inordinately delayed. It was also clear for quite some time that it would not really unearth the conspiracy behind the assassination or name the real culprits in the killing. The interim report itself, by all accounts, did not go beyond opinions expressed by journalistic writings on the subject over the past six years. It also did not explore the highly debatable relationship between the LTTE and the Congress or its allies including the AIADMK. It also did not delve into the highly controversial Indo-Sri Lanka accord, the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, the behaviour of the IPKF in these areas, the humiliation meted out to the Tamil people or the military onslaught upon them. The IPKF ultimately turned out to be a force of occupation and behaved as such. It is now recognised that the Indo-Sri Lanka accord and the deployment of the IPKF were diplomatic, political and military disasters. These were misadventures probably prompted by an ambition to play a 'big brother' role in the region. A military solution was attempted where only a political one was possible. The sympathy for the Tamil rebels of Sri Lanka probably increased in India after this insensitive step. One does not have to sympathise with the LTTE at all to wonder why the government of India accepted a 'contract' put out against the Tamil rebels by the then President of Sri Lanka. The report of the Jain Commission is silent about the hurt and anger felt by the Tamil people of Sri Lanka.

The United Front government could not have accepted the interim report as definitive or taken any action on that basis immediately. These precisely were the demands of the Congress. It wanted punitive actions against its old foes in Tamil Nadu. The demand to exclude the DMK from the ministry was, in effect, a demand to break up the United Front. It seemed and was a flimsy excuse to bring down the government.

The report and the rhetoric around it by the Congress compounds the hurt and humiliation of the Tamil people even further by questioning the nationalism and national loyalties of even the Tamil people of India! One

more debacle is, perhaps, necessary to bring it to its senses. It would, perhaps, then render another apology as it has done so belatedly over the failure to protect the Babri Masjid but, and significantly, not over the failure to protect life and property in the aftermath of the demolition.

The issue in reality was not the report of the Jain Commission or the punishment of the real killers of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi. The Congress out of power is a helpless party that finds it difficult to stay together in such a situation. Factional discord and dissent in the party are kept in check or within manageable proportions only with the sops of power or with threats of withdrawal of these rewards from the dissenters. It has thus been a difficult task for the Congress since the last election to remain united and to function in unison. It currently is also without any ideological mooring. Protestation of 'loyalty' to the Nehru-Gandhi family, of a feudal and personal nature, seems to be its only point of reference. The factionalism led to an escalation of extreme notes in response to the report of the Jain Commission.

The Congress then behaved as it had earlier. There were no political or ideological issues. There were no principled stands. There was no consideration of social or national interests. It was a pathetic effort to grab an illusion of power if not power itself. The Congress may have brought down a government as a result of its actions but is unable to feel any glory in the act for perhaps even it knows that it has signed a death warrant for itself in its very exercise of 'strength'. It has become a victim of its own churlish, selfish manipulations.

For some years the Congress managed to survive in power with a combination of charismatic populism and clientelism. Currently it has neither a charismatic leader nor the wherewithal to extend patronage. Its actions thus rise out of a desperation.

### **Election 1998 : Significance**

The fall of successive governments, three in nineteen months, and the prospect of mid-term parliamentary election produces confusion, anxiety, fear of instability and above all uncertainty. It can also produce an apathy

towards the entire process, a disinterest in politics. These reactions again hold no surprise. Opinion makers and media have also done their bit to foster these feelings.

The responses may be no surprise but are essentially dangerous. Disinterest and apathy harm no one but the people.

In The People's Agenda issued prior to the election in 1996 INSAR highlighted the crucial nature of that election. The situation has not changed in the basics. The months in between were in a sense an interregnum, a period of incomplete transition. The issues remain the same as the ones in the last elections, viz., the future of democracy, the policy of globalisation and the threat of communalism.

The situation is as delicate as it was in 1996. In some ways it is even more precarious.

These elections provide an opportunity for the pro-globalisation, anti-democratic, casteist and communal forces to make yet another bid for power. The possibility of their success can not be dismissed out of hand. Only the vigilant and conscious action of the people, immediately voting, can prevent them from coming to power. Power in the hands of the authoritarian communal and casteist forces spells a disaster for the people and the nation. Only the people can protect themselves. The people must do so.

The opportunity provided by the election to the people also must not be lost from view. The people have a chance through the ballot box to push through their interests and agenda. They have a chance to elect a government that is responsive, responsible and accountable to them; that is federal, democratic and transparent; that is truly secular.

### *THE CONTINUED THREAT OF GLOBALISATION*

The policies of globalisation, under the sobriquets of reforms, liberalisation or modernisation have penetrated further and deeper, invading new sectors. Their adverse impacts on the people are already clearly seen. It may not yet be possible to accurately measure these effects and proffer them as

'hard statistics' but their existence can not be denied. Livelihood opportunities, access to natural and collectively created resources, incomes, living standards, social security and welfare amenities have all suffered. Subsistence and sustenance production and activities have come under pressure. Caste and patriarchal oppression have acquired sharper teeth. Cultural identity and existence are threatened. The environment is constantly endangered.

The development paradigm in India has always been questionable. The forces of globalisation seek to make it even more problematic. Profitability, intense exploitation of resources, capital intensity and labour replacement become the new divine tenets of all economic activity.

Mr. L. K. Advani has not yet woken up to the fact that the potato chip is the indelible other side of the computer chip under the rule and realm of trans national capital. The Hindutva brigade is, however, known to use its perception and intelligence only to coin catchy but hollow adages and to plan pogroms against the minorities.

The nature of the dangers of globalisation has become crystal clear with the dramatic crises faced by the 'Asian tigers' once touted as shining examples of the success of globalisation. The Indian people must learn from the experience of others and restrict these forces at once.

The frightening fact is that there now seems to be a consensus amongst the parliamentary political parties on the issue of globalisation. The three successive governments led by the Congress, (the transitory one by) the BJP and the United Front all vowed to and did continue the policies of 'reform'. They hold out the same promise if voted into power now. The differences are on specific programmes, measures and their intensities.

The United Front government also showed an enthusiasm about 'reforms' in the economy. It was, however, under constant pressure from the Left, a constituent of the United Front. Some sensitivity to the people, their situation and aspirations was, hence, shown by the government. The proposals to open up the financial sector to foreign investment was, for example, shelved. Some efforts were also made to fulfil some of the basic necessities of the people.



The people have, of course, risen against globalisation, in whatever manner they could. So far their agitations have only had some limited results in specific cases. They have not yet succeeded in rolling back or halting the penetration of globalisation. To achieve this end a massive collective effort is necessary. It has to begin with electoral participation in this election.

### *THE MARCH OF THE COMMUNAL BRIGADE*

It is true that there has not been any major communal carnage in the past two years or more. It is partly an achievement of the central government. The episodes that have occurred have been essentially sporadic. The threat of communalism has, however, not been eliminated, overcome or mitigated. Great efforts are, in fact, afoot to vitiate the entire social fabric. Communal ideology and politics are actively propagated to date with new fervour and some new elaborate refinements. It must be remembered that the fanatical and violent face is only one countenance of communalism. It is the most extreme form which is ever present as an ultimate threat. There are, however, other 'moderate' and 'reasonable' forms more acceptable to the middle classes in periods of relative quiet. These versions are insidious and thus more dangerous in certain circumstances. They acquire a veneer of reasonableness, respectability and acceptability. They also masquerade as 'national' rather than communal agendas. They dispense with the abusive vitriol of the street goons and indulge in clever double-speak and sophistry but are in the last analysis equally venomous. Hindu chauvinism is now equated with nationalism and patriotism. The loyalty of a member of a minority community (or of a rebellious oppressed caste) to the country and the society is held suspect till conclusively proved otherwise. The 'conclusive proof' more over is a vitriolic criticism, if not condemnation, of the person's own community, its political representatives, its specific demands, a willingness to join right wing Hindu communal forces and a belligerent, jingoistic attitude towards Pakistan. The ritual element may be underplayed in political terms but special rights and privileges of the (invariably, though surreptitiously, upper caste) Hindus as members of the majority community and, hence, the 'natural' and legitimate dominators of the society are championed. The subsidiary status of the minorities is advocated. Their existence is made conditional on the tolerance and sufferance of the majority community. History is falsified to deny the

contribution of members of the minority community to the society. More dangerously the entire logic of history is sought to be distorted and religion alone established as the motive force of all endeavour and change. Members of the minority community are then, for all practical purposes, treated as aliens in the ('Hindu') country (to be shaped and ruled by the upper castes).

There is more to the politics of communalism than an unfair and unjust treatment of the minorities. The intolerance and the regimentation extends to the Hindus themselves, at least some of them, the dalits and the adivasis in particular.

The communal mesh consists of many types of organisations that perform different functions and display different levels of aggression, militancy and rigidity. This is more than a politically clever ploy. The varied, heterogeneous and complex structure and nature of 'Hinduism' itself makes such a multiplicity necessary and inevitable. The different organisations have, of course, a common core and commitment but different emphases, accents and bases. An organised, monolithic, homogenous Hinduism may be a dream of the Hindu chauvinists and communalists, it is not a reality. The different organisations thus reflect a real diversity. They can be united and a pan Hindu sentiment created in times of tension and conflict but the unity is not static. It is constantly threatened and challenged and, therefore, continuously re defined and re structured. Different voices are, therefore, frequently heard. All these, nevertheless, are communal voices that aim at communalisation of the society and polity. The differences between various spokespersons are essentially cosmetic, specific and particular, not essential. There are no reasonable versus rabid, moderate versus extreme, parliamentary versus street-tough, religious versus profane, theocratic versus democratic, scholarly versus unenlightened, rational versus fanatic factions. Mr. L. K. Advani, Mr. Govindacharya, Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpeyee, Mr. Murli Manohar Joshi, Ms Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Ritambhara are all gods of the same Olympus. They all work towards the same goal and aim, and share a basic commonality of purpose and action. Their ultimate goal threatens first the unity and then the very existence of the toiling masses.

Communalism does not, of course, exist in a vacuum. It flourishes in an environment of globalisation. Globalisation leads to a dissolution of

collectivities; a covert and indirect character of the system, exploitation and exploitative mechanisms; commodification of culture and creation of an ethical vacuum; decline of social relationships and responsibilities; speculative mentality, an urge towards acquisition, fierce individualism and cut-throat competition, as well as general insecurity. These rapid (basically adverse) changes create a climate that is conducive to the creation of a speculative mentality, a superstitious attitude. They reinforce primordial identities and available foci of articulation and organisation. They foster and reinforce communal attitudes. Moreover, communalism (along with its other forms, ultra-nationalism and racism) is one ideology of choice for globalisation. It has the potential to overcome the fragmentation of the producers and strengthen the unity of the market while it keeps suicidal competition alive. It can identify spurious causes of misery, posit false enemies and propose dream solutions. It can create powerful fetishes and entrap the people in external attributes and 'pop' rituals. It can also lend a 'divinity' to economic forces and mechanisms. It exalts a fraudulent identity and seeks to shape social practices around it. Communalism also provides a political prescription. The fraudulence of direct action, benevolent authoritarianism, identification of the state and the individual, glorification of a community and 'people', nostalgia about a golden past, contraction of actual democratic rights (often to simulate an ancient feudal regime) are the often used devices to stifle all opposition, particularly the organised opposition of the toilers. Inconvenient democratic mechanisms and institutions can also be liquidated in this manner. The politics of communalism also introduces a certain instability and insecurity in the society in which the market seems the only stable, dependable, objective, constant and non-whimsical institution. The market then lays claim to all roles, functions, duties and responsibilities of the state and other social institutions.

Communalism seeks to dissolve and destroy the secular character of the society and polity. Secularism is not merely the protection of the rights of the minorities or freedom of faith and religion or equality of members of all communities before the law. Secularism involves the non-interference in economic and political matters by elements of faith or religion. It involves the separation of state and religion and thus protection of the autonomy of the state. It also means a decision making process which is based on reason

and is without prejudice or bias. It embraces an exploration and creative appropriation of the traditions of the people. Secularism is by its nature democratic and places the people, the toiling masses, at the centre of affairs.

Communalism seeks to subvert the Constitution of the nation, it seeks to erode the republican nature of the country, it seeks to destroy the democratic rights and spaces of the people, it seeks to compromise the autonomy of the state.

The struggle against communalism and for secularism cannot be left to the state or political parties alone. It has to be a social, political and cultural effort by the people. It requires the widest of unity and the broadest base of operation. The task initially falls to intellectuals and activists. They will have to combat communal propaganda, delegitimise the communal organisations and win back the social and political space for secularism.

### *DANGERS OF POPULIST CASTEISM*

Caste is a reality of social life in India. It has a long history and tradition. This is a history of discrimination, repression, oppression, exploitation and atrocity. The ideological and cultural constructs of caste have had severe economic, social and political impacts. Division of labour and social hierarchy in India was based on caste. Even in modern times economic and political power, occupational possibilities, social status and general opportunities have been dependent upon caste. The relevance of ritual status or the material base for the ideology of purity and pollution may have disappeared but caste differentiation and discrimination continues to be a living reality. There may not be an exact overlap between caste and class (- there are different castes in each class and different classes in each caste -) but an overall general correspondence between the economic-social-political status and caste location can still be found in abundance. Modernisation of the society has in fact at times led to an exacerbation of caste tensions and conflicts that at times take the form of caste wars.

Obviously, there have been intense reactions to this situation. The oppressed castes in particular have been engaged in politics and movements of protest for the past many decades. These movements have generally taken three

routes. The most radical has been one of a call for annihilation of the caste system and caste itself. Such movement may emphasise the caste question, even give it prime importance, but is not a caste-based movement, certainly not one of a single caste or sub-caste. It is a revolutionary, democratic, movement of all oppressed sections of the society that desire a radical social transformation. It seeks to bring about a fundamental change in the structure of the society and bring forth a society free of exploitation, oppression and discrimination.

Another route often followed is of a caste based movement which opposes definite instances of oppression and demands general social justice. Such a movement does not necessarily evolve an ideology of annihilation of caste and the caste system but limits itself to an opposition to the overt forms of discrimination and deprivation. It does not necessarily attack the basis of the existence of the caste system and the formation of castes but demands a more or less equal share for the specific caste it represents in economic assets, political power and social opportunities. It is radical in so far as it criticises and opposes traditional structures of domination and demands a greater devolution of power and wider distributive justice. Such movements, however, lead to a consolidation of castes and caste organisations.

The third type often talks of social justice and general equality but is firmly based on caste consolidation and caste organisation. It does not even struggle for social equality or transformation but remains limited to capture of greater resources for its own base. It does not in practice seek the end of oppression. It often mimics the ideas, values, mores and ideology of the 'upper' castes and tries to become one of them. It often turns an oppressor of women and of other castes 'lower' to itself. It has no social revolutionary attitudes. It essentially indulges in concession mongering and capture of assets, resources, power and opportunities for itself. It too represents an advance over the traditional, reactionary, authoritarian ideologies and organisations in so far as it challenges the powers of the traditional rulers and effects a limited devolution of power and partial democratisation.

In the past few years India has witnessed a caste politics which is of the populist but conservative variety. Names of great social revolutionaries of

yesteryears are invoked all the time but the reality is one of a single caste based movement that seeks to advance the interests of that particular caste. These are generally championed against the interests of the other oppressed castes. Accommodation is often reached with organisations of the 'upper' castes but repression is let loose against the 'lower' ones. Caste politics of this kind does not, except in a very limited and indirect manner, advance the cause of social equality or transformation. It often champions opportunism and temporary gains. It divides the toiling masses, sets sections of them against each other, erodes the ideologies of real transformation and liberation. It also mounts an indirect attack on the secular principle as it legitimises caste based politics. Some such organisations of the middle castes are also in active league with the communal forces. They become willing partners of the pan-Hindu political and ideological spectrum. Some such organisations have been involved in some of the bloodiest atrocities against the 'lower' castes and the minorities in the recent years. They also seek to impair the republican and democratic character of our society and polity.

### *THE SIEGE OF DEMOCRACY*

The threats to democracy and freedom of the people also remain as real as before. The rights of the people to organise to oppose policies of globalisation, in particular, are in jeopardy. The hard earned rights of the organised workers and the ephemeral protection enjoyed by the unorganised workers are imperilled as global capital sets up its enterprises and pushes forward its plans and programmes of the 'globalisation' of India. It is well known that towards these ends it seeks a modification of the basic labour laws of our country. The rural people, specifically the adivasis and the dalits, are also threatened with evaporation of legal protection in the face of the take over of their lands by the new projects that will be touted as great advances towards modernisation and development. The far more fundamental rights to dissent and to oppose the rulers are also endangered by the state as well as armed squads of goons. Opponents face incarceration if lucky, physical elimination if not. These are the most glaring of the possibilities (that have, in some states of the country, already become realities of day to day life). There are many more insidious ones. The dangers of the subversion of the judicial process, the erosion of the rule of

the law, the misuse of constitutional privileges and usurpation of illegal authority by apparatuses and minions of the state are already on the horizon. The machinery of the state, particularly the law and order one, with active instigation and protection of rulers, considers itself beyond the pale of all laws, rules, regulations and norms. Appropriation of powers of the state and government by unconstitutional and unaccountable centres of authority and power (some of which are patently criminal) is almost a norm in some areas of the country. Certain topics are already put beyond the bounds of discussion with the use of brute force in parts of the country. Private 'armies' organised on the basis of economic or caste interests already carry out brutal massacres in places. Ideologies of extreme (largely but not exclusively Hindu nationalism) stifle many voices and opinions. There is also a talk of codification in statute books of the practical though illegal contraction of human and democratic rights of the people.

### *THE PEOPLE DO ACT*

The situation is fluid.

The dangerous trends described above are glaringly visible. They are not, however, unchallenged.

The anti-people forces have not yet gained any decisive victory. They meet with resistance at every step. They are not able to become stable or to dominate, to rule. These forces, in fact, have made concessions, diluted programmes, retracted some stands. They have not done so because some wisdom has suddenly dawned upon them or 'wiser counsel' prevailed. They have rethought their policies (at least cosmetically and temporarily) because these have met with resistance and rejection from the people. It may not be a change of heart or even a genuine response to popular assertion but it does indicate the strength of the people's reaction.

The people have fought against policies of globalisation in whatever way they could. They have moved the courts, pressurised representatives, petitioned legislatures, launched industrial actions, resorted to direct struggles, taken to the streets, sometimes even taken the law in their own hands. They have done this despite concerted opposition from the opinion

makers and the media. The lapse has been on the part of the established political leadership. The people have fought a lone battle, sometimes successful sometimes not so. The 'limitations' of the people's actions, viz., their specific, localised and particular nature, is more an indication of the failure of the maturity of the political leadership rather than the people's weakness, particularly of their resolution.

The people have also shown their disinclination towards communal politics. They have refused to fall prey to the continuous vitriolic propaganda. They have also voted in the last elections for the non-communal parties in majority. They have forced the Hindutva brigade to dilute its communal agenda and to strike a note of compromise. They have also generally supported programmes of secular action. Communal tensions may have remained endemic to some spots but have not expanded beyond these specific areas.

### *POPULAR WISDOM*

The people have shown that they are aware of the critical issues that face the nation.

They have demonstrated that they perceive the threats that confront them. The people have made their desires and will known.

The people have generally demanded an independent, pro-people, non-destructive development.

They have generally supported the cause of social justice.

They have sought to safeguard the secular character of the society and polity.

They have stood for the protection and extension of human and democratic rights of the citizens of this country.

The people have expressed a desire for freedom and for dignity.

The people showed their will and desire in the last elections of 1996. They voted with conscious wisdom. They firmly rejected the Congress. They did not select the BJP. It was the people's will that prevented the ascent of the BJP to power despite the thirteen days of grace it got. The express wish of the people made it impossible for MPs from other parties to cross over and support the BJP in May 1996 or in November-December 1997.



Ultimately it was the popular will which brought into existence the broad coalition of regional, left and democratic parties, forged the United Front and held it together through testing times. Enticements and open invitations failed to flag off 'horse trading' at the national level because the MPs knew that turn-coats will face political annihilation at the hands of the people whenever they get a chance to cast their votes. Elite pundits are always cynically sceptical but the people of India have always shown acute perception and clear vision in moments of crucial significance.

The vote in 1996 may have been negative but it was based on a vision that ultimately dictated the Common Minimum Programme of the United Front. It was thus a 'revealed text'. The limitations and lacunae were of the scribes but the spirit was of the almighty people.

The experiment of 1996 was indecisive. It could not exactly bear fruit. The parliament was 'hung'. The Congress as well as the BJP (seen by the analysts and projected by the media before -- and even after -- the elections as the only potential ruling parties) occupied too many seats in the house. The United Front only came into existence after the election was over and the XIth Lok Sabha constituted. Its policy document was somewhat hastily put together as a basis for consensus.

The will of the people remained unfulfilled through this experiment. The major achievement was that it indicated a direction, pointed to a way. The goal was not reached.

### *ELECTION : CONTINUATION OF STRUGGLE*

The forthcoming election poses the same choices before the people yet again and ask them to decide their own destiny. The election of 1998 is a continuation of the unfinished battles of 1996. The structure of the previous parliament made any decisive resolution of the issues impossible. The slogans will be many. The issues are clear and crucial. Globalisation, communalism, casteism and democracy are the major points on which decision has to be taken. Corruption, criminalisation of politics, social justice, gender justice and rights of the people to decide their own destinies are the details to be taken into account.

The people will have to vote once more so that definite decisions can be taken on these issues. The people will have to complete the unfinished tasks of 1996. The election of 1998 thus becomes even more significant than the previous ones.

There is yet another danger linked to this election. The election offers a chance to the right wing, communal, authoritarian forces to make a bid for power. Their victory will spell untold hardships for the people of India. The economic, political, social and cultural rights of the people will be seriously threatened in such a situation. They will also lose the political spaces for action, for protest.

It is necessary therefore to be vigilant and conscious, to be active in the election process and to vote decisively to defeat these anti-people forces.

The fact that the people are called upon to vote once again in less than two years produces some tiredness, even some anger. A general tendency could be to ignore the election. The people can do so only to their own peril. This election will decide the shape of our future. The people need to vote this time to ensure that the election does not turn out to be the last free and fair election in the country, that the people continue to have a right to decide their own future, that the people have a right to live according to their beliefs and faiths, that there is an equality before law of all citizens of this country. The people shall through the election make sure that the goals of social justice and gender equality survive, that no unaccountable, self-appointed dictators decide their destinies in a whimsical manner, that the country and the people are not auctioned off to the highest bidder in bribes, that their livelihoods are protected. The election will decide that rule of law continues, that the people have the right to voice their dissent and opposition, that the people continue to enjoy fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution, that the people have an opportunity to strive and struggle for dignity and freedom. It will not be an exaggeration to say that this is a make or break opportunity, a do or die situation. The vote is the highest power that the citizen has in a democracy and the people must exercise it as many times as necessary to protect and further their interests, to preserve the country and its people.

## Some Misgivings

The developments of the past few years (since the Janata Dal government of 1989) and particularly since the last election have created an anxiety in the minds of the people. The failure of governments to last the full term or their beleaguered existence or their failure to command clear majorities in the parliament have produced fears about stability, continuity and security. The media have also played a role in creation of these fears. They have nurtured them and often blown them out of proportion. The "opinion makers" for their own reasons have raised a spectre of anarchy and called for a strong state -- one that would determinedly, even ruthlessly push through policies of globalisation without consideration of social disquiet, unrest and opposition from the toiling masses.

It should also be remembered that the present is a period of transition. Rapid changes take place not only in the economic structure and social institutions but also in the political sphere. The features seen now like instability or weakness of governments, splits in the parties, realignment of political forces, multiplicity of specific and narrow political forces, the tendency towards coalitions are characteristics of this period. They are not necessarily permanent or desired features of the political scene but are inescapable realities of the day. They generate an anxiety nevertheless since they affect the immediate future and thus our lives immediately.

These qualms and fears need to be confronted and discussed. Some of the features of the situation are potentially hazardous, others have only been made to look so.

### *THE FEAR OF INSTABILITY*

The major fear is the fear of instability brought on by the weakness of the government. The United Front government too was considered to be unstable and fragile because it did not command a parliamentary majority and because it was a coalition government rather than a monolithic, single party formation. It is considered axiomatic that instability and weak governments are bad, that they do not and can not deliver the goods, that they jeopardise the security and safety of the nation, that they can not

maintain law and order, that they can neither enact nor implement any meaningful policies, that they endanger economic progress and thus the security of livelihoods.

Weak and unstable governments are at times ineffective. They are, at times, unable to enact and implement policies despite their desire to do so simply because they lack the numerical strength in the legislature to ensure the passage of many bills. In recent times the people saw the sad wrangling over the bill to grant definite representation to women in all legislative bodies. Parties even within the United Front, despite the commitment made in the Common Minimum Programme could not overcome their anti-woman attitudes. Almost all parties, except the Left, ultimately opposed the bill. Other major promised measures like the comprehensive bill on agricultural labour or the comprehensive labour law could not be enacted due to the same reasons. In some cases it was difficult to secure an agreement within the United Front itself and in some cases it was not possible to garner support from parties outside the ruling United Front. The arithmetic also made it impossible to bring about any amendments to the Constitution. These are definitely the weaknesses and shortcomings of a weak government. A pro-people government to be able to fulfil its mandate needs a decisive majority and secure tenure in office.

All the fears are not necessarily realistic all the time. Experiences in our country as well as in others prove that 'unstable' governments do not mean a general social break down or stagnation. The major break downs in law and order in India in the recent past were in November 1984 and then in December 1992 - January 1993. Both disturbances were communal in nature and occurred when strong, single party governments (of the Congress) were in power at the centre and in most of the states!

Parliamentary majority and stability are not absolute, autonomous or independent values. They are dependent on the social balance of forces and reflect the real power equations in the society, in both the class and ideological terms. The parliamentary strengths of parties only reflect the strength of their bases in the society. The structure of the last few parliaments would indicate that India is in a period of transition, that social and ideological forces are still in struggle, in a situation of flux, that no

force has yet won a decisive victory. Artificial parliamentary majorities in a such a situation will be as fragile as minorities. They will, perhaps, be more dangerous since open compromises dictated by legislative weaknesses will not be transparently worked out and tensions will not be resolved but would lead to flash points.

The instability which accurately reflects the social balance of forces in the society is in fact advantageous to the toiling people. It is an indicator that democracy is alive and functioning. Stability in such situations can only be a dictatorial repressive stability. It indicates an ossified state of affairs in which the propertied classes have already triumphed decisively and the toilers have lost out. Such a situation blocks negotiations, bargains and readjustments. Instability on the other hand provides spaces for action, opportunities of manoeuvrability and possibilities of defence of rights. It is possible in such situations to limit repression, win concessions, modify policies and insist on legal guarantees of our interests. The opinion makers and media fear instability precisely for this reason. They fear any extension of the freedom and rights of the people. It may not be out of place to recall here that the 'opinion makers', surveyors, psephologists, media personalities are all direct or indirect employees of the major corporations, They are on their pay rolls or under contract to them or sponsored by them. It has even been suspected that the so called opinion polls are at times manipulated if not fabricated and often utilised as propaganda pieces of the right wing forces though touted as objective and scientific findings.

The Congress and the BJP have made stability a major plank of their election propaganda. The stability that they propose is not pro-people, democratic or secular. It is repressive and authoritarian.

The Congress calls for stability because it has no other slogans to advance. It has always tried to fashion a strong central government and an almost unaccountable state machinery. It has shown scant respect for the autonomy of the states and consistently denied the rights of people to self determination. It has needed a compliant administrative machinery without accountability, independence or autonomy. It has in the name of stability often interfered with the state legislatures, the judiciary, the media and the investigative agencies. It has required this strong and stable government

to facilitate its violation of norms and laws, its dubious and disreputable economic actions and its corruption. It has, despite commanding parliamentary majorities, not really been able to offer a stable government. Internal dissent and altercations kept the governments under Mr. Rajiv Gandhi and Mr. P.V. Narasimha Rao highly shaky. The facade of strength and stability could lend no efficiency to these governments. The call for stability today is even more dangerous. The stability and peace it proposes is for the forces of globalisation. It wishes a strong and unshakeable rule of the corporations. It promises to create conditions in which all the wishes and whims of the corporate world, foreign and domestic, will be fulfilled without question. It wishes to ensure a total sell out of the country without any opposition or public debate or even public knowledge. The stability offered by the Congress will be a stability of exploitation and oppression. It will be a stability for disaster.

The Hindu communal stability of the BJP is even more dangerous. It has already revealed itself to be a duplicitous party. Its real agenda is also clear. It seeks to destroy the secular character of the society, to communalise India, in alliance with the forces of globalisation. People will progressively lose all rights to struggle. There will be no spaces for action. Autonomy of the state will be eroded. The rule of law will come under severe threat. The life of the minorities and of the oppressed castes will be under siege. All dissent will be stifled. Independent intellectual or cultural activity will also be limited or snuffed out. The state apparatus will be utilised in a partisan and punitive manner. Fanatical goons will enforce a stability of the cremation ground.

The people fear such stability. A situation of flux is far preferable to such authoritarian, repressive stability.

Only one precaution is called for in this situation. The instability must not lead to a weakness in the face of forces of globalisation. The government must be able to take a firm stand in the national interests, in the interest of the toiling people of the country. Global capital seeks to redefine the state. It tries to force it to withdraw from some of its roles -- those of supervision and regulation of economic activity, of provision of social security and welfare, of protection of the interests of the toilers. Instability can lead to

an unopposed advance of global capital. Repressive stability on the other hand will always be an active and enthusiastic ally of the forces of globalisation.

The position should be very clear. There can be no glorification of instability for itself and by itself. A pro-people government will also need to be stable and have sufficient strength to ensure that its programme can be implemented. The people need to fear the slogan of stability for its own sake. It is not an absolute virtue. Right wing, communal, authoritarian stability does not serve the interests of the people. Instability, as a temporary and immediate occurrence is preferable to such repressive, undemocratic stability.

### *THE REALITY OF COALITION POLITICS*

The other fear which is constantly conjured is of coalition politics. Commentators from the establishment and some media pundits seem to work over-time to denigrate fronts and combinations of political parties and groupings. They portray coalitions as fragile formations without any basis except a petty and self-seeking hunger for power. They believe that such combinations are strange mixtures that can not have a unity of purpose and determination.

The United Front was always mocked as a crazy mixture of thirteen disparate ingredients. It was constantly predicted that the different constituents will pull in different directions and make any decisions impossible. It was also said that they will be at each others' throats and fall apart in the face of the first challenge, however flimsy that may be. They had also predicted that the government will be a paralytic one that just marks time and achieves nothing.

None of the predictions have come true. They were not based on any realistic appraisal of the situation and ignored lessons of history as well as examples from around the world. Many countries in the world are successfully governed by coalitions. The most effective and stable governments at the state level in India have been coalitions, viz., the Left Front in West Bengal and the Left Democratic Front in Kerala. There are

in reality no single party contestants in the field any longer. The Congress and the BJP too have realised that they can not win on their own and are also engaged in forming alliances and fronts. The contest broadly will be between the three fronts, one led by the Congress, one led by the BJP and the United Front. The fronts of the Congress and the BJP are despite their earlier slogans, without concrete agendas and programmes or even ideological commonalties. History has exacted its curious price. The United Front, once denigrated as a motley combination, will perhaps be the only combine to go to the polls with an ideological and programmatic basis for the alliance.

Once upon a time the Congress fulfilled the role of an umbrella organisation, a grand alliance of different social groups with differing interests, together to champion a common cause. It underwent a change in its structure and functions most markedly in the '70s. It ceased to be a polycentric organisation and became a monolith. It then lost its power to amicably mediate, to resolve divergence, to forge functional commonality. It became a dominant organisation of big business impatient with others and intolerant of differing interests. This paved the ground for the formation of autonomous and independent organisations often at war with each other.

The situation today is peculiar. Particular organisations have today become a rule. Even when broad ideological positions are shared specific interests seek specific, independent representation. Coalitions, hence, become a norm. There is no need to look upon them as accidents or impurities. They provide a democratic space for negotiation of different interests. Each specific interest is then modified as it is fulfilled in order to achieve a larger common goal.

Pro-people, democratic, secular organisations will ultimately have to take up the role of defence of particular interests while they forge broader unity of the people. The task remains unfulfilled at the moment. Coalition politics thus becomes the contemporary form of democratic politics today.

There are of course coalitions of various types. Three major fronts are in the fray today. The BJP has aligned with strange partners all over the country. There is no commonality of ideology or programmatic vision



amongst the partners of the Hindutva front. It is a shamelessly opportunist alliance of questionable elements. This is a shameless front of power seekers who suddenly discover untold virtues amongst each other. The partners of this front, except for the Hindutva brigade, are in a political wilderness and unsure of their own continued existence. They seek to ride the BJP bandwagon and derive some mileage from the Hindutva mania if they can. The BJP in its turn seeks to become a clearing house for Congress and Janata Dal defectors. It also attempts with this desperate alliance to find a foot print in states and regions where it virtually does not exist. This coalition is obviously politically unprincipled and morally bankrupt. It represents no commonality of vision or purpose except perhaps for a communal core. It reflects neither an alliance of social bases, sections of the people or a new ideological formation. This collection of sellers of the soul is therefore necessarily fragile.

The so called Jan Morcha forged by the former Chief Minister of Bihar, Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav, is even stranger. There is a great uncertainty about even its constituents. The nature, location and extent of the alliance is also in continuous doubt. The partners of this collection are, of course, alliance experts. They change partners almost every month and swing from one extreme of the political spectrum to the other with the adroit ease of the adept acrobat. Mr. Yadav's government (direct or by proxy) despite its other cynical actions is reputed to have implemented some programmes in Bihar to the benefit of the toiling masses, including the dalits, OBCs and minorities. The same cannot be said of any of his partners in the alliance. His own stand is dictated more by his venom against his opponents and detractors in the Janata Dal and his desire to be in power in Bihar at any cost than by any principles. Given the fickleness of the constituents of the Jan Morcha in their alignments only a miracle can keep it together for any noticeable length of time.

The coalition based on a common minimum programme, a commitment to secularism, democracy, federalism, social justice, transparency and accountability -- the United Front -- has already survived an ordeal of fire. Not even extravagant promises of continued power and benefits could break the basic unity of its constituents. Differences of opinion on various issues cropped up between the partners at various times. These were

resolved in a democratic manner. The coalition survived and continued to function with some unison. This was possible because the basis of this coalition was sound. Power at any cost was not the preoccupation of this alliance. The United Front has, in fact, proved the validity and feasibility of coalition politics and governance in the country if it is principled and programmatic.

The example of West Bengal illustrates the point quite clearly. The Left Front survives and functions reasonably healthily despite the fact that the CPI(M) has the electoral and legislative strength to govern the state on its own.

### *REGIONAL PARTIES AND FEDERAL POLITICS*

The regional or state level parties have become prominent in many states of the country in the past few years. They have dominated the politics of those states, challenged the national parties and some times replaced them. The dissension and splits in some of the national parties have also taken state level dimensions in recent years. It is also claimed, only partly in jest, that some of the so called national parties are nothing but federations of different state parties. The regional parties played a significant role in the United Front government.

The existence, rise and domination of the regional parties is not exactly new. The origins lie in the demands for the reorganisation of the states on a linguistic basis. Their operations are also indicative of the federal nature of the Indian Union and politics today.

The aspirations of the different states and their particular interests were once expressed within the framework of the national parties. The conflicts in interests of different (usually neighbouring) states were also resolved under the umbrella of national parties and ideologies. Only in rare cases regional formations came into existence. These too were often considered to be temporary, except in some specific states. In the recent years, however, they have become important, prominent and stable formations.

Some regional parties have had traditional alliances with some national parties. It was with the United Front that they played a remarkable role in

a government at the centre. The election of 1996, the formation of the United Front and the later events up to the current election make it clear that most of the regional parties are geographically limited, concentrate on the affairs of the state but are also concerned with politics and policies at the national level.

The regional parties represent specific demands from the particular states and voice the feelings of the people related to the uneven nature of development as well as distribution and sharing of resources. They express discontent against the centre as well as grievances towards other -- usually neighbouring -- states. They generally have a populist rhetoric and often a mixed social base.

They are in the main representatives of the regional propertied classes. They voice the desires and aspirations of the local capital -- agricultural, industrial and trading. They negotiate on behalf of their constituency with the national capital, economic establishment and political centres of power. They have currently taken up demands of economic and financial autonomy including the desire for freedom to negotiate with foreign capital directly for investments in the states.

In caste terms the regional parties articulate the demands of the middle castes, the new dominant factors in the politics of the state. They have generally not championed the interests of the toilers -- the agricultural labourers, workers, dalits, adivasis or women. These generally are also not organisations that represent the people's desire for autonomy -- the desire to be in charge of their own destinies, to have a say in the economic affairs, to wield political power, to preserve their culture and identity, to have a right of self-determination.

The regional parties may not be an ideal political solution. They are, however, at the moment generally popular, broad based, democratic, secular formations. That is precisely why some of them became a part of the United Front. It is also notable that the so called Federal Front did not accommodate communal, chauvinist organisations within its fold. The regional parties have nevertheless shown themselves to be somewhat closer to the masses of their states. They have been close to the reality and thus are aware of

the problems faced by the people as well as their aspirations. They have also, by and large, taken on a populist stance. They have projected the demands of their base as the demands of all the people of the state, sought to accommodate some genuine demands of the people and cast a broad democratic charter. There is inevitably a certain element of chauvinism in their stance but it has in recent years not attempted to posit an enemy. Their demands have been of greater autonomy and of a more federal structure of the republic. Some of these at least have taken a clear secular stand and shown some sensitivity towards social justice and greater devolution of power.

The rise of the regional parties and federal politics are often portrayed as potential threats to the unity and integrity of the nation by some forces. The concept of national unity and integration advocated by these forces is rather peculiar. They believe in an authoritarian unity of an abstract nation imposed by a few from above. Their unity does not take the people into account nor does it seek to integrate them. It is in probability a unity of markets and integration of territories for the sake of raw materials and productive activities. All this is, of course, advocated in the name of nationalism and a national culture. This culture too is amorphous, homogeneous, without any distinctive features, without popular participation, without diversities and without complex interactions. It mirrors their own beliefs in and attempts to create a regimented Hinduism or a faceless global culture of consumerist hedonism.

The unity and integrity of India depends upon the willingness of the people. It depends on the free choice of the various sections of the society to stay together. This can only be possible if they have a guarantee of true equality of opportunity as well as freedom from discrimination, oppression and exploitation. It is only possible if the resources -- both natural and human created are shared in a just, fair and equalitarian manner. It is only possible if the different cultures and sub cultures have equal rights and opportunities to exist and flourish and to interact. It is only possible if the identities of different sections are not threatened with annihilation.

The regional parties at most demand such equal treatment. They do not threaten the unity and integrity of the nation but create the basis for a more enlightened voluntary togetherness.

Unity is threatened when autonomies are violated. Domination by a specific group or coalition of groups and abandonment of the principles of federalism pose threats and dangers to the nation, its unity and integrity. The United Front, in its short rule, showed a genuine concern for the principle and practice of federalism. It has pointed a direction in which further efforts can be made.

### **A Period Of Transition And Polarisation**

The issues before the people and the threats faced by them have already been discussed. Some additional features of the situation, however, need to be emphasised. These have significant bearings on the struggles of the people as well as on the current election.

The first and foremost is the rapid change that the Indian society experiences along with the rest of the world. It is truly a period of intense, extensive and fast transition. Every aspect of life and reality from the production process and economic activity to the cultural paradigms and ethical values undergoes a total overhaul. Nothing remains the same. Nothing remains recognisable. The technological and material changes are the most visible and, perhaps, also the easiest to cope with. The transformations in social institutions, political processes, culture, mentalities and values are not so obvious at first glance. They are also the ones that demand the most adjustments.

The period of transition is one full of opportunities since it represents a transformation in human life. It is also a period of great dangers. The changes by themselves create anxieties and fears.

Peculiar and at times contradictory attitudes may come up in political, social and cultural spheres in such periods. The sheer vastness and pace of the change can blunt and confuse critical faculties. There may then be a tendency to welcome all changes without any discriminating examination only because they are changes. The 'new' in such cases becomes without reservation 'good' and 'desirable' whatever its impacts on the people and their lives. Some bards of 'progress', 'reforms', 'modernisation' fall a prey to this point of view and become advocates of disastrous development paradigms or of globalisation.

The changes can also create a great anxiety and a tremendous sense of loss at the disappearance of the familiar. This may provoke a reactionary viewpoint which rejects all change because it is change and attempts to invoke a nostalgia or to hang on to the past. Only the known and old is then trusted. The changes also produce a sense of insecurity and continuous instability. Not only the external material and institutional world changes in this period. Communities collapse, the personality and the personal moorings also become clouded. Individual securities become questionable. All continuities are disrupted or threatened. The new age also seems to create a tremendous crisis in beliefs, faith and values. The transition is seen as an assault on the self and the community. The traumatic experience -- real or imaginary, individual or collective, personal or vicarious, direct or indirect, overt or covert -- can produce strange responses. It can lead to superstition, a distorted religiosity, a rejection of everything foreign. This can provide a basis to identity politics. It can also create a fertile ground for the communalisation of the society and polity which may combine with or masquerade as ultra-nationalism.

It may also be worthwhile to consider that the apparent decline of the mass organisations, the instability in the political sphere, the rise of social and political formations based on specific and narrow identities, the incipient communalisation of particularly the middle class mind could all be products of this age of transition.

The period of transition is also a period of polarisation. The technological revolution, the drastic alterations in the production process, the global reorganisation of economic activity, the altered nature, character, function and operation of capital, the domination of the market, the attempted 'shrinkage' of the state, the rapid degradation of the environment, the commercialisation of culture, the manipulation of religion and identity all throw up basic issues of policy, perspective and stand. The middle ground fast disappears. There may be confusion at an individual level. The protagonists themselves may not be able to identify their own positions with clarity. There may even be a motley mixture of different points of view at an individual level. The basic issues and lines, however, become clearer day by day. Should there be production for the masses or for the elite? Should economic activity be directed towards satisfaction of genuine

human needs or towards maximisation of profit? Should markets be the arbiter of the world or should the society regulate them? Should the state merely maintain law and order or should it ensure the welfare of the citizens? Should there be a domination by the elite or should there be social justice, elimination of all privileges and annihilation of caste? Should women be free with rights over their own bodies and selves or should they be in bondage, however covert? Should there be a market friendly 'democratic' regime or true participatory democracy? Should religion be allowed to meddle in politics? These are some of the issues on which there are clear distinctions of opinion. These are of such a basic nature, not only in theory and ideology but today as never before in day to day practice, that vague compromises are no longer possible.

These are also issues germane to the Indian society and polity. They surface directly and indirectly also in the coming election. The distinctions have made it difficult for the organisations that repeatedly attempted compromise combinations to be effective, to retain their strengths. The so called parties of the centre are affected by the situation most intensely. The crisis of the Congress and similar other parties is perhaps due to this aspect of the objective reality.

### **The Contenders In The Election**

It is now clear that three fronts in the main will contest the election. The parties which had mocked coalitions and alliances are also in a desperate search for collaborators. 'Common minimum programme' has suddenly become a key phrase. This in a certain sense helps to clarify the issues and pose them sharply.

#### *THE BJP COMBINE*

In the past few months we have experienced the actual rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party in some states. The mask has come off and the reality of the BJP stands exposed. The BJP has proved to be a party without scruples that happily cohabits with corrupt and criminal elements to get a shot at power. It routinely uses violence and strong arm methods. Its governments have repeatedly indulged in questionable deals and contracts. It has defied

democratic norms and institutions and introduced a regime of lawlessness. The police forces under its rule have proved to be trigger happy, often slaughtering innocents. They have ruthlessly liquidated political opponents and protesters. The BJP has shown a great enthusiasm for foreign capital and corporations despite the continuous litany of nationalism and swadeshi. In its greed and enthusiasm to please foreign corporations it has endangered not only the environment but also national security considerations. It has on the whole treated the minorities as secondary citizens. The dalits have faced a similar fate at the hands of the BJP and its allies. The BJP has capped its actions with open indulgence in horse trading, buying of legislators, overt associations with questionable elements.

The danger is not only of corrupt, capricious misrule. The rule of the BJP eats away the very foundations of our secular democracy; imperil the autonomy of the state, and erodes the rule of law and independence of the judiciary. The republican tradition itself faces an eclipse.

The violence that the BJP legislators and supporters unleashed against opponents in the Gujarat and U.P. legislature buildings amply demonstrates its culture and character.

The BJP also cynically indulges in a double speak on every major issue. Different leaders make contradictory statements every day. The 'hard liners' within the BJP family mock the statements of the 'moderates' openly. They regularly renew the threats of violent communal outbursts.

The plank of stability and strength of the government that the BJP now proposes is equally dangerous and partially fraudulent. The party is unstable even when it is in power. The opportunist, unprincipled alliances that it strikes with strange and disreputable forces compound the scandalous hunger for power. The stability it offers is a repressive stability of an authoritarian, militarist Hindu rule in which the toilers, the oppressed castes and the minorities will lead a wretched existence.

The BJP is also a believer in military might, war like stances and trans-border adventurism. It may not have the courage to actually wage a war but it generates a constant war hysteria. In their thirteen days of rule it



tried to appease the armed forces, promised them higher budgets and more destructive equipment. It constantly swears by the nuclear option. The people will have to bear the economic costs of such mis-adventures. They will also be subjected to a mentality of regimentation.

It must be emphasised that there are no real moderates in the BJP. On all fundamental issues Mr. Atal Bihari Vajapayee, the famed moderate and liberal within the party is in total agreement with the 'hard liners'.

We must defeat this dangerous force decisively in the coming election.

### *THE CONGRESS AND ITS ALLIES*

The Congress is today a discredited, disheartened force undergoing disintegration. Its historical umbrella role is over in the age of transition. The defections from its camp to the BJP, the departures of entire state units into BJP alliances expose the frailty of the ideology and secularism of the Congress. It today pathetically struggles for survival. Its hopes of a magic turn of fortunes by roping in Mrs Sonia Gandhi demonstrate the despair quite clearly.

Its search for allies has also not proved very successful. It has attempted combinations with some parties like the BSP but without conviction though the combination may yield some favourable results for the Congress in some parts of the country. The Jan Morcha is strongest in Bihar. Its impacts elsewhere is in great doubt.

The Congress may not be considered by many to be the prime enemy because of the greater and more vicious threat of the BJP and because of the weakness of the Congress itself. It has not however succeeded in convincing other parties of its credibility in the struggle for secularism and democracy despite the now oft repeated apology for the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

The measure has come too late and is too limited to sound anything but opportunist. The attitudes that it took towards the United Front government do not help its cause at all.

## *THE UNITED FRONT*

The United Front really tests the waters in this election. It came into existence after the last Lok Sabha was formed and came to power almost by default and on a basically negative plank.

This time, however, it has to contest the election as the United Front with a common policy and programme which will have to necessarily go beyond mere opposition to the BJP and the Congress.

The United Front has already demonstrated some strengths. It was able to come up with a guide document, the Common Minimum Programme. It was not an ideal document nor was its implementation satisfactory but it did prove that it was not an opportunist power hungry alliance. It also indicated the democratic, popular, secular and federal tendencies of the United Front. The United Front also demonstrated its basic unity. No section or party split away to join any other contenders for power. It is known that the BJP made hectic efforts to bring about such a defection. It failed not only when the United Front ruled but even later. To date no component of the United Front has joined the BJP alliance. None is likely to do so. The problems faced by the Janata Dal are the problems of that party and not of the United Front. The JD too is probably is a victim of the winds of polarisation and is now changing its character. The United Front also has a clean record, though it may be argued that it enjoyed power only for one and a half years. Others in the same period have provided ample evidence of nepotism and corruption.

The main cause of anxiety is perhaps the enthusiasm shown by the United Front government for pro-globalisation policies. The Left did try to put some checks on the zeal and kept it within some limits so that the interests and aspirations of the people were at least partly protected.

Clearer pro-people stands are now expected from the United Front. It must guarantee a protection to the people, a clear minimum needs programme. It must promise distributive, social and gender justice if it is to become a popular alternative.

A major responsibility lies with the Left in the United Front. It must take lead and imprint its opinion in the coalition. It must champion the interests of the people. It will not be enough to be free to criticise. It must accept the historic responsibility of even being a part of the government if that can actualise its vision and protect the interests of its base.

## **VOTE FOR A NEW ERA**

The election we have emphasised is crucial.

It is necessary to defeat communal and authoritarian forces in the election.

It is also essential to control, limit and roll back policies of globalisation. The threat of the policies of globalisation has not abated. The nature of the threats has become crystal clear with the dramatic crises faced by the 'Asian tigers' once touted as shining examples of the success of globalisation. The Indian people must learn from the experience of others and restrict these forces at once.

The victory of anti-people forces in the election it cannot be stressed enough will spell a doom for the people. Livelihoods and lives will be endangered. Political, economic and cultural rights will be eclipsed.

The people must be vigilant, conscious and active. They must use the vote as a weapon to defeat enemies and to create opportunities.

The people, must vote for a government that will stand by a pro-people programme that guarantees livelihood, employment, social security, social welfare, gender justice, caste justice, secularism and democracy. We need a government that will be strong in the face of forces of globalisation, communalism and authoritarianism but will be accountable to the people and respect their rights, their urge for autonomy and democracy.

Coalitions and alliances have become a rule in this election. We must reject the opportunist, unprincipled ones firmly and back the ones that have a common programme and at least a minimum ideological coherence.

The election provide a chance to the people. The victory of communal, authoritarian forces in alliance with forces of globalisation spells a doom for them.

We, the people, must defeat these forces at all costs.

We the people must be conscious and vigilant. We must be active in our electoral participation. Our struggle for freedom and dignity must continue and we must create political spaces for it through the election.

We must use the elections to usher in a popular, national, secular democracy.

**Indian National Social Action Forum (INSAF)**  
**Mumbai,**  
**January 14, 1998.**