

THE PLEDGE taken by Janata Party members at Rajghat after they were swept to victory in the 1977 Elections. Many behind-the-scenes negotiations had to be conducted before the four Opposition parties could coalesce into a unified whole.

26.11.78

Janata - The Way It Was Born



It is necessary to recall the exact circumstances which led to the coming together of different opposition parties if we wish to understand the Janata's inherent limitations and its style of functioning during the 20 months it has been in power. The author, a well-known political commentator, sets straight the record presented in some recent publications.

by A.G. NOORANI

It is no more possible for a political party than it is for a human being to be immune from the impact of the milieu in which it was born. The birth of the Janata Party provides a fascinating study for reasons more than one. First and foremost, it helps one the better to understand its internal set-up and the limitations which have constricted its working. Secondly, the negotiations for the establishment of the Party reveal how the democratic Opposition parties responded to

the political challenge of the Emergency. Finally, since the process of their unification and the attempts to negotiate with Indira Gandhi were intertwined, one gets a good glimpse of her tactics and techniques as well as of the frailty in adversity of a couple of the Janata stalwarts.

There have been books aplenty on all these aspects. But Brahm Dutt's book, *Five Headed Monster* (Surge Publications, New Delhi; Rs 40) deserves particular attention. It purports to be "a factual narrative of the genesis of the Janata Party" and is written by one who was expelled from its membership moments after its birth. He is now, predictably, in the Congress-I and leads the Opposition in the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council.

The documentation is useful but not thorough. One gets a better picture of the reactions of the BLD than of other parties. Mr Dutt shows, moreover, a profound contempt for sequence or order. Together, these limitations make the narrative somewhat misleading especially in view of the author's lack of candour about his own *volte-face*. The reader must, therefore, read the documents for himself and they are fully set out in Dharendra Sharma's excellent compli-

ation, *The Janata (People's) Struggle*, published earlier.

The four constituents of the Janata Party—Congress (O), BLD, Jana Sangh and the Socialist Party—were evolving a strategy for a united campaign in the wake of the Allahabad High Court's judgment when Mrs Gandhi struck on June 25, 1975, and arrested their leaders. The Opposition MPs who were left free acted together on an informal basis. Not till January 1976 did a Janata Front in Parliament come into being. To N. G. Goray's repeated pleas in 1975 for a "round-table conference" of representatives of the Government and the Opposition Mrs Gandhi sneeringly replied that a conference would be of no use "now (in January 1976) whether the table is round or square". But Goray and H. M. Patel, as leaders of the Front in the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha, respectively, made a major, but unsuccessful, bid to open a dialogue by a letter to the Prime Minister dated January 14, 1976.

By then the first meeting of some of the Opposition leaders in jail had already taken place. It was in Ward No 2 in Tihar Jail on January 4, 1976. The jail officials had begun to allow MISA detainees in one ward to meet detainees in other wards once a week.

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Thus 250 political prisoners met, prominent among them were Messrs Charan Singh, Prakash Singh Badal, Sunder Singh Bhandari, Jagan Nath Rao Joshi, Nanaji Deshmukh, K. L. Gupta, S. S. Tyagi, Lala Hansraj Gupta and Surendra Mohan. B.M. Sinha's paperback, Operation Emergency, gives an insider's account of the meeting. Some of the leaders met later the same day to discuss the merger of their respective parties into a new party. The process, which was to last a year, had now truly begun. Messages were sent to detainees in other jails.

The leaders discussed two proposals; one, for unity on a federal basis and the other, for complete merger. Charan Singh was for outright merger, the rest were for federal unity.

In March 1976, Charan Singh was released from jail. A united group of BLD, Congress (O), Jana Sangh and the Socialists was formed in the UP Legislature. It was called *Lok Paksh* with Charan Singh as its leader.

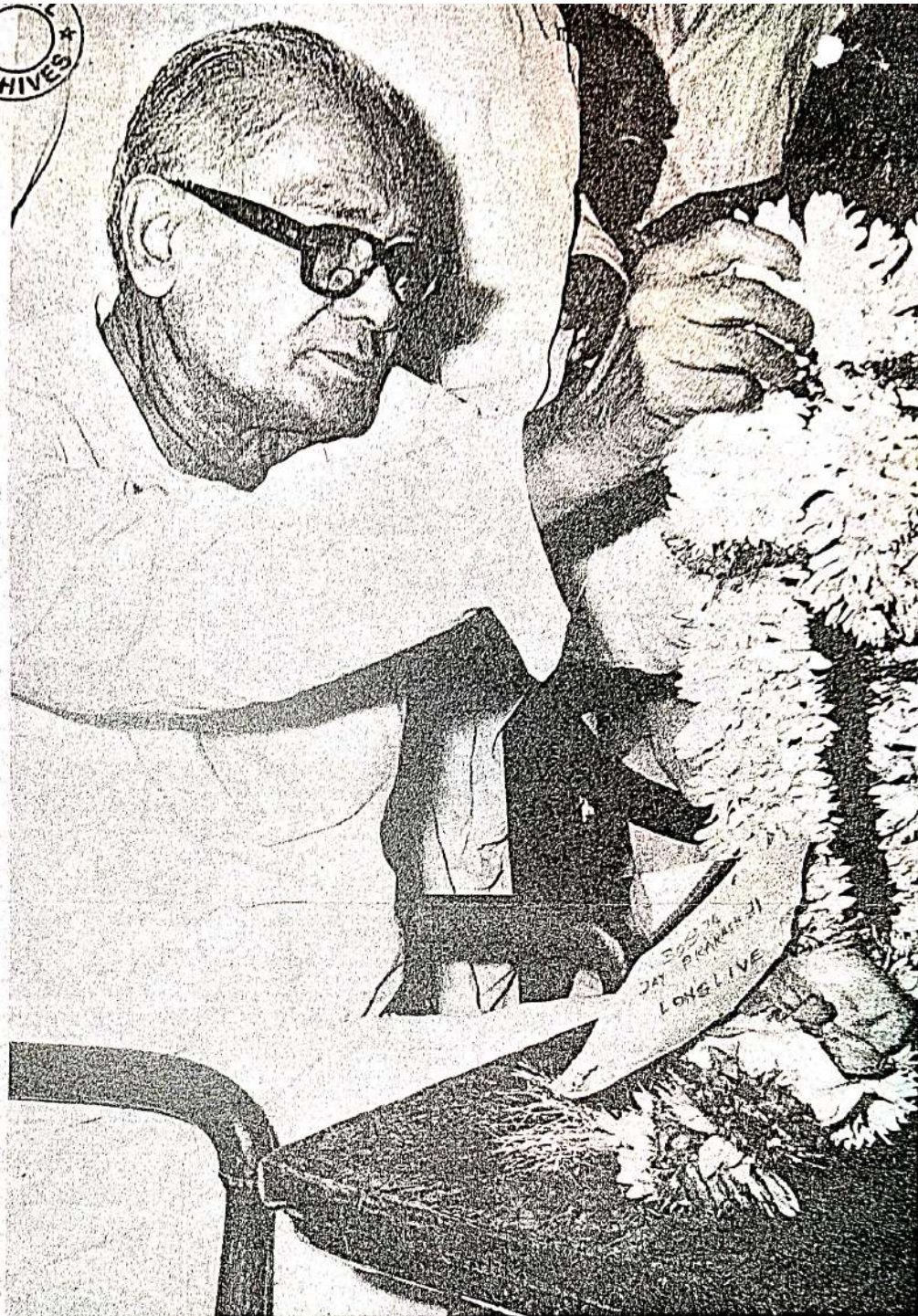
Opposition Unity

Meanwhile, in Bombay JP had been active in the cause of Opposition unity. He convened a meeting of members of the Congress (O), BLD, Jana Sangh, Socialist Party, DMK, Revolutionary Socialist Party, some independents and some Sarvodaya workers. The meeting "decided to set up a Steering Committee composed of the following members with powers to co-opt: (1) N. G. Goray—Convenor, (2) H. M. Patel, (3) Shanti Bhushan, (4) C. P. Tyagi". It was asked to draw up "a policy and programme for a single unified democratic Opposition Party. It will also be the duty of the Committee to ensure that the process of integration is completed in the shortest possible time, not exceeding two months".

The members present were Acharya Kripalani, Charan Singh, N. G. Goray, H. M. Patel, Shanti Bhushan, Om Prakash Tyagi, Tridip Chaudhary, Narayan Desai, S. M. Joshi, Umashankar Joshi, Krishna Kant, P. G. Mawlankar, S. Nijalingappa, Babubhai Patel, Uttamrao Patil, Era Sezhiyan, Sequeira, Digvijay Narayan Singh and Yadunath Thatte.

JP defined his own position to the conferees. In his view "some programme of resistance must continue even if it is token, and we know it is token, in as many places as possible... We should show that there is protest and that there is no acceptance of what exists in the country".

On the unification of Opposition parties JP said: "I have been pleading and pleading with the Opposition parties. It is most disappointing that they have taken such a long time to take a decision which should have been taken within three months of the Emergency. They will all be decimated unless they do this. In Parliament, they now have such a bloc. Now, they have taken a decision



THE GARLANDS WERE HIS. Jayaprakash Narayan set in motion the process which culminated in the formation of the Janata Party: He convened a meeting of Opposition parties early in 1976 which decided to set up a committee to draw up "a policy and programme for a single unified democratic Opposition party... (and) to ensure that the process of integration is completed in the shortest possible time, not exceeding two months".

to do this outside also... The people must be given an alternative."

The author reproduces the text of the BLD's Acting General Secretary, Bhanu Pratap Singh's letter dated April 9 to N. G. Goray outlining the BLD's position on the "Approach Paper" drafted by the Steering Committee. "That the name, flag and symbol of the New Party be different from the present one of any of the parties joining to form the New Party. The BLD suggests that the name of the New Party be 'Janata Party' or 'Lok Paksh' and the symbol be a 'Farmer Driving a pair of Yoked Bullocks'.

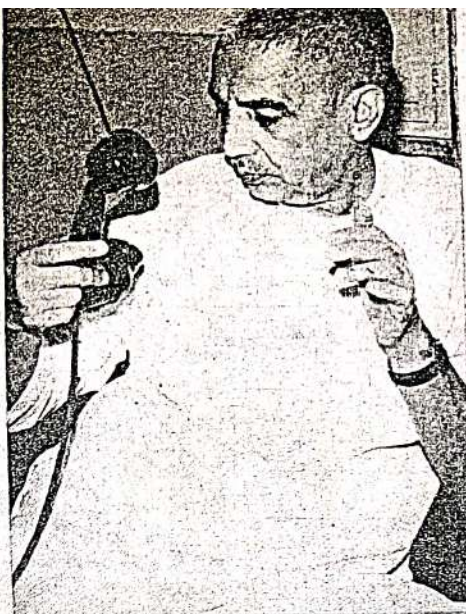
"That on the eve of the founding of the New Party all parties which join the New Party, will stand dissolved. Members of the existing parties will join the New Party as new entrants, according to the rules of the New Party framed for the purpose. All entrants to the New Party will be treated alike and will have equal opportunities for occupying elective posts."

The letter also set out the Party's views on some basic economic issues. Bhanu Pratap Singh sent one more letter, on May 8, forwarding Charan Singh's note on the

"App. ch Paper". He was concerned with another issue on which he felt strongly—suspending the movement launched by JP and the Opposition parties.

Charan Singh raised this question in Bombay on May 23 at a meeting of leaders of the various parties convened by JP in Bombay. The meeting considered the Steering Committee's Report and "decided to request Jayaprakash Narayan to launch a new party whose basic objectives will be the restoration of civil liberties, of the freedom of the press, of the independence and the dignity of the judiciary; the establishment of an egalitarian social order; and the formulation and implementation of an economic policy designed to eliminate unemployment and maximise production, agricultural and industrial, while safeguarding the just and fair claims in particular of small and marginal farmers, of agricultural labour, of industrial workers, and of the weaker sections generally. We are glad to state that Jayaprakash Narayan had acceded to our request and will take such steps as are necessary consequent upon the decision of forming a New Party". The statement set out the policy and programme of the New Party at some length. JP formally launched the New Party at a press conference on May 25.

The BLD was alarmed. Its Executive passed a resolution on May 31 which said that while it "welcomes the appeal made by JP, and is keen to expedite the founding of the New Party, it cannot but express the concern at the manner in which the New Party is sought to be established. First of all, it should have been ensured that the four parties would dissolve themselves and join the New Party. Congress (O) and Socialist parties have not yet taken any decision. Even the Jana Sangh resolution is vague and not final. The very purpose of forming the



A BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNICATION. The BLD was "concerned" at the "manner in which the New Party is sought to be established." Charan Singh complained to JP that things were not as they should be—that the existing parties should be dissolved before the new one was launched, not after it, and urged that JP should suspend his movement.

New Party would be defeated, if even one of the parties remains out, in which case, the BLD may not join the New Party".

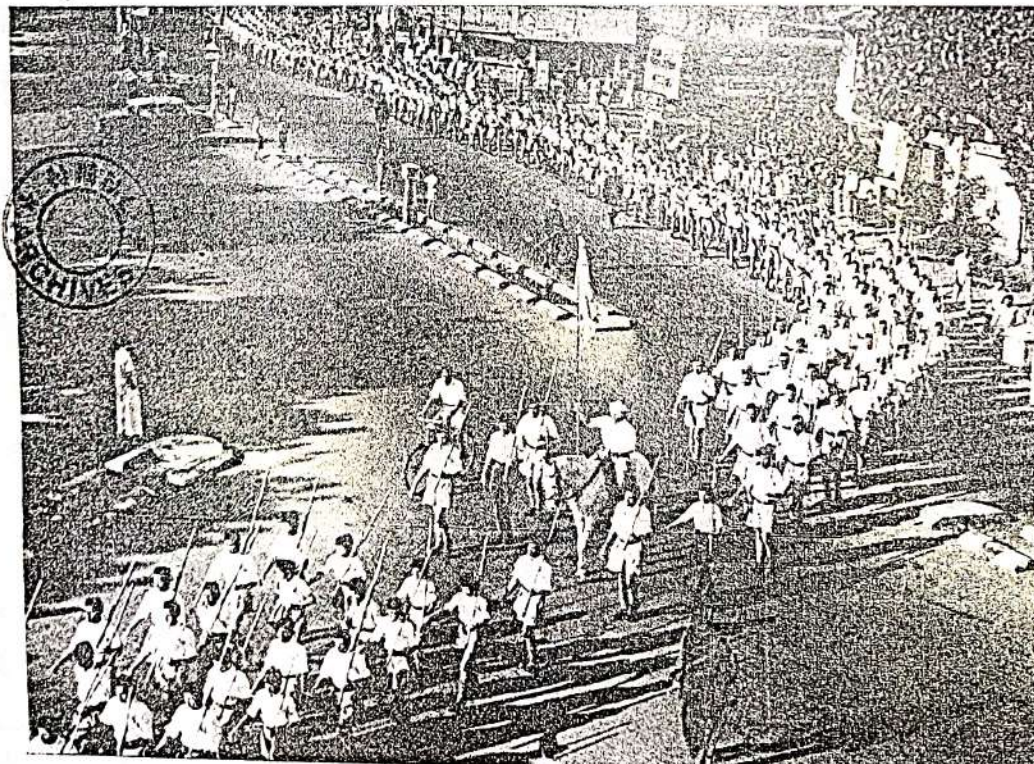
A week earlier, Charan Singh had wired to JP to urge that "leading movement and organising new party simultaneously not possible". JP's reply (May 27) was that suspension of the movement was not proper. Charan Singh wired again, on June 1, set-

ting out a string of complaints. "I am afraid that whatever we did in our last meeting in Bombay was done in haste." The existing parties should be dissolved before the new one is launched not after it. He urged the suspension of the movement and claimed that Atal Behari Vajpayee as well as Mr Goray held the same view. He was particularly piqued by JP's remark that "a view was held in certain circles that I was so keen about the emergence of a united opposition because I want to become a leader".

JP and Charan Singh met again in Bombay on June 21. According to Mr Dutt, who accompanied Choudhary Sahab: "JP conceded that he acted in haste in fixing a date for inauguration of the New Party without a prior decision by the leadership of the parties to dissolve their organisations. Further, it was agreed that the leaders of the four parties would meet in Delhi in early July to thrash out all the issues concerning the New Party."

This meeting took place in New Delhi on July 8. But, a few days earlier, on June 26, Charan Singh had written to Indira Gandhi urging her that "as Prime Minister of the country and leader of the ruling party, the initiative for effecting reconciliation within the country and for creating conditions for restoration of democracy and civil liberties as also for evolving a code of conduct binding on all, must come from you. This requires that..."

Five conditions were listed—release of detainees, lifting of press censorship, a joint meeting of all the political parties to evolve a code of conduct, "a firm date for elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies" and a tribunal to go into the evidence against the banned parties. Asoka Mehta was fully aware of this letter, for on July 9 he requested Charan Singh to let him "know the



"ESSAYS IN SHEER SYCOPHANCY" is how the author describes the letters written by RSS Chief Balasaheb Deoras (right) to Mrs Gandhi during the Emergency. "All he wanted was release from prison." The RSS was one of the parties banned at that time. Left: An RSS procession.

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developments regarding your letter to the Prime Minister."

The meeting on July 8 was an essay in futility. Charan Singh was for outright merger "all the 24 hours of the day and 30 days of the month" and the others, for "joint functioning".

But the minutes record (Para 4) an interesting discussion: "Ch. Charan Singh raised the question of the RSS. He stated his firm beliefs that no RSS volunteers can join the New Party and no member of the New Party can join the RSS. It was a question of dual membership which could not be allowed and there should be no scope in the New Party for surreptitious work. Mr Tyagi said that the New Party can lay down whatever conditions it sees fit. Currently the RSS is banned and it stood dissolved." O. P. Tyagi, who represented the Jana Sangh, clearly conceded the New Party's right to rule out dual membership of the party and the RSS.

"BLD Is Fed Up"

Two days later, Asoka Mehta pressed Charan Singh to agree to the "joint functioning of the four parties as a part of the process of unification". The other three had already agreed to this. Charan Singh rejected the plea outright. He would accept nothing short of merger. "BLD is now fed up; even its motives have been doubted. So, it has decided to go it alone, free from thought of any duty in this regard—except one, viz, if and when the three parties dissolve or decide to dissolve themselves in order to form one organisation based, by and large, on the programmes broadly indicated by the Father of the Nation, BLD will make haste to join."

The main, though not the only, obstacle to merger was the Congress (O). Its Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and West Bengal units were against the move. The other units were for it. JP was pressing the Congress (O) President, Asoka Mehta, to expedite the unification process. So were L. K. Advani and Madhu Dandavate from the Bangalore jail. There must be no postponement of the party's inaugural conference, they emphasised.

In September Asoka Mehta held discussions with Charan Singh, O. P. Tyagi and Surendra Mohan and was able to arrive at a substantial measure of agreement on merger proposals. By now the Jana Sangh and the Socialists had fully committed themselves to merger. So had the Congress (O) Executive. But there was a snag here as Asoka Mehta's letter to Charan Singh revealed. "Only one point, that of Presidentship—of importance, indeed—is there. The proposal (is) to await Morarjibhai's presence amongst us. I do hope that you and your National Executive will find it possible to help in consummating the noble end we all have in mind."

Charan Singh's reply spilled with scorn: "My National Executive, whose delibera-

tions continued till late in the evening of October 11, would like to congratulate you on the tremendous progress made by your Working Committee towards democratic unity. You propose to await the presence of Mr Morarjibhai amongst you before finalising the matter. On our part we consider the present round of talks with all its commitments, which began on September 10, closed just as the previous one which began in Tihar Central Jail on February 8, closed on July 8. If and when, however, your thoughts turn to the 'noble end we all have in mind', of which you speak in your letter, we will be only too glad to discuss the questions again from scratch."

In November, Charan Singh turned to JP at long last and asked him to take the initiative to launch a new party and ask the existing parties to join it—the very procedure to which he had objected in May. Representatives of all the four parties met JP in Patna on November 13 but nothing tangible emerged from the talks. JP is reported to have exclaimed in despair: "I wash my hands clean of merger."

Institutionalising Dictatorship

By then, Mrs Gandhi had gone a long way towards institutionalising her dictatorship. The repressive 42nd Amendment was well on its way to the statute book. The elections due in 1976 had been postponed. Mr Sanjay Gandhi rampaged about the country with the full approval of his mother. The dynamic succession seemed secure. It marked the beginning of the last phase of the Emergency in which a good few who were hitherto opponents of the regime began to waver. They must be distinguished from those who counselled dialogue with Mrs Gandhi in order to arrest the trend and salvage the remnant of democracy in the country. It has become fashionable after the Emergency to attack them but the derision is vulgar and cheap. No freedom movement is free from differences of opinion between the "hawks" and the "doves". It is not the moderates who seek conciliation with dignity but the escapists, who seek peace without dignity who deserve censure.

Charan Singh's letter to Mrs Gandhi of June was a dignified one. So were the letters written by N. G. Goray, H. M. Patel and Asoka Mehta. He wrote to her on October 12 to "give you in good time an idea of the conditions which must exist in the country so as to ensure free and fair elections".

Mrs Gandhi Replies

Mrs Gandhi replied and for the first time. All the earlier letters by Goray, Patel and Charan Singh had been studiously ignored despite the Choudhary's plea "in any case, I expect the courtesy of an early reply". The reply to Asoka Mehta was, however, given through Om Mehta, Minister of State for Home Affairs on November 8. He brusquely demanded that the Opposition should first give evidence of change in its attitude. Asoka Mehta persisted. "While it is wise to scrutinise the activities of the Opposition in the past or the present, it is equally part of wisdom to scrutinise the functioning of the Government and its behaviour towards the people and the Opposition," he wrote to Mrs Gandhi on November 23.

But approaches of an altogether different kind were also being made to her and they could not have failed to stiffen her attitude. One such approach was made by Biju Patnaik. Mr Dutt describes his attitude and reproduces the text of his statement of October 16 issued shortly after his release from prison. He said, "During the last year since Government decided to assume extraordinary powers, restrict the Courts and curtail civil liberty, some decidedly good things have happened in that nation's economy. It is inconceivable that with an unbridled Press and Parliament as then, Government could have taken any firm, prudent or pragmatic steps long overdue, without being sliced and dubbed as lackeys of black money, deviationist, anti-socialists, anti-labour, etc."



THIS IS NOT OUR "APPROACH". Asoka Mehta (above) promptly denied that the "Approach Paper" presented by Biju Patnaik (centre) to Om Mehta (right) was "fully approved by the leaders of the democratic Opposition parties", as claimed by Mr Patnaik. Far right: Surendra Mohan, now Janata MP, together with Asoka Mehta wrote to Biju Patnaik informing him that the document represented only Patnaik's personal position, not that of the Opposition.

He proceeded to elaborate on his gratuitous certificate by listing the "gains of the Emergency" applauding the 20-point programme and even condoning the excesses as inevitable in the circumstances but attributable to "the myriad minions of Government". He concluded by saying that "the distinctive gains made by the nation during this period should not only be maintained but strengthened, not through fear but by awakening of national consciousness of the citizen". What is the worth of a plea for a dialogue after such abject grovelling?

Mr Patnaik hosted a lunch in New Delhi on December 4 to which were invited Om Mehta, Mohammed Yunus and Charan Singh. He presented Om Mehta with an

"Approach Paper". It is sufficient comment on the Paper that it was rejected by the other Opposition leaders.

In the famous "My dear Om" letter which Patnaik wrote on New Year's Day, 1977, he claimed that "this paper was fully approved by the leaders of the democratic Opposition Parties who met at the residence of H. M. Patel, MP, on December 16 and 17 as an approach paper for further discussion".

Asoka Mehta promptly denied this in a letter to Patnaik dated January 4. "May I point out that all of us did not agree to treat your paper as 'Approach Paper'—but just as an approach. The paper, you will recollect, was considered as your aide memoire to the other side."



Dandavate met JP at Patna on January 8 and 9 when the latter told him categorically that he "does not approve of the document submitted by Biju Patnaik as the approach paper for dialogue because of its apologetic tone". When he was informed that Surendra Mohan and Asoka Mehta had written to Biju Patnaik informing him that the document represented only Patnaik's personal position not that of the Opposition, JP wanted those letters should be sent to Om Mehta also "so that the Government knows that the Opposition had dissociated itself from the document".

Mr Dutt praises Mr Patnaik for his "conciliatory attitude" and had indeed, helped him during this period. But he accuses the RSS of playing a "dual role" by "encouraging the Sangharsh Samiti and assuring JP of its full support through leaders like Nanaji Deshmukh, and, on the other hand, it was seeking a settlement with the Government". However, Mr Dutt's inconsistencies affect his credibility not the record itself which fully justifies the charge against the RSS.

RSS Dual Role

Mr Dutt cites issues of the RSS paper *Panch Janya* in support of his charge as

well as the letters written by its chief, Balasaheb Deoras, to Indira Gandhi, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, and Maharashtra's Chief Minister, S. B. Chavan, during the Emergency. They were placed on the table of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly on October 18, 1977.

Panch Janya very much welcomed the emergence of Sanjay Gandhi, a product of the repressive era, in national politics. That Mrs Gandhi herself is most careful to keep him away from her politics since, testifies to her opinion as to his real worth. Mr Dutt cites issues of December 21, 1975 and April 4, 1976.

Mr Deoras' letters to Mrs Gandhi are essays in sheer sycophancy. He wrote on August 22, 1975: "From the jail, I listened with rapt attention to your broadcast mes-



sage relayed from AIR and addressed to the Nation on the 15th August 1975. Your speech was suitable for the occasion and well balanced so I took the pen to epistle this letter." It was, actually, a raving and ranting performance by Mrs Gandhi at her worst. On November 11 he began another epistle thus: "Let me congratulate you as five judges at the Supreme Court have declared (upheld?) the validity of your election." As is well-known, that victory was obtained, not on the merits of the case, but by a retrospective amendment of the election law in her favour.

"Set Us Free"

Mr Deoras apparently saw nothing wrong in this. All he wanted was release from prison. He begged of Acharya Vinoba Bhave—"you kindly try to remove the wrong notion of the Prime Minister about the Sangh, and as a result of which the RSS volunteers will be set free, the ban on the Sangh will be lifted and such a condition will prevail as to enable the volunteers of the Sangh to participate in the planned programme of action relating to country's progress and prosperity under the leadership of the Prime Minister."

On her part, Mrs Gandhi made it amply clear that she wanted the Opposition to pre-

sent herself before her in sack-cloth and ashes before she would condescend to talk to it. She replied to Asoka Mehta and H. M. Patel in these terms on December 23: "Once there is a genuine acceptance of the changes that have taken place, a clear disavowal of communal and separatist policies, a repudiation of the politics of violence and extra-constitutional action, and also a constructive approach to social change, then it would not be impossible to find solutions to the problems between Opposition and Government."

"This We Believe"

JP's comment on this letter was "Mrs Gandhi expects us to express some kind of repentance for our past deeds. This is impudence unworthy of the Prime Minister of a great nation. However, the Opposition document entitled 'This We Believe' is suf-



ficient response to Mrs Gandhi's conditions." This was a document put up in the December meeting.

It may be recalled in this context that, on May 26, Mrs Gandhi greeted the first signs of Opposition unity with a fusillade of her favourite charges ranging from communalism and addiction to violence to foreign support.

Mrs Gandhi announced her decision to hold the Elections to the Lok Sabha on January 18, 1977. Five days later, the Janata Party was launched. Mr Dutt's book throws little light on this crucial phase and a blurred one on his departure from the new party and his entry into the Congress-I.

There is not a word of appreciation of JP's decisive contribution in the formation of the Janata Party. Some, like Balraj Madhok in December 1976, had come to hold that "JP cannot play any worthwhile role in bringing about unity in the Opposition". They were proved wrong.

However, it is only fair to Mr Dutt to acknowledge that amnesia about JP is not confined to him alone. It extends to many others, as well.