

SYSTEM SCAN

With the government and the Opposition agreeing on the terms of reference, the last hurdle to the Joint Parliamentary Committee inquiry into the securities scandal has been overcome. The JPC's brief indicates the probe will not be hamstrung by restraints such as those placed on its 1987 predecessor. The terms of reference are comprehensive and the decision to exclude specific mention of foreign banks is eminently sensible.

True, the issue of individual culpability cannot be evaded. However, the JPC will do well to concentrate on the systemic aspects of the scam. Irregular and fraudulent practices may have been perpetrated by individuals but these, nevertheless, occurred in an institutional context. It is important the JPC avoids the fallacy of composition inherent in viewing the organisation as a sum of the individuals who work for it.

On its part, the JPC should be mindful of the real issues thrown up by the scam. A plausible hypothesis for the bank-stock broker link occupying the centre-stage of the scandal is that it originated in the National Housing Bank. Although the remit of the JPC is wide ranging, it should initially focus on the curious conduct of this public financial institution. The NHB functioned without a board of directors until April 1992. Its record keeping is, to put it mildly, disgraceful.

TERROR IN TERAJ

The death of the Khalistan Liberation Force terrorist, G.S. Budhsinghwa, in an encounter in Ludhiana last week was bound to lead to retaliatory killings. That it took place in the Teraji region of Uttar Pradesh is not entirely unexpected. Ever since the Punjab police got its anti-terrorist act together, the secessionist groups appear to have selected the Teraji as a sanctuary.

The strategy has not succeeded on two counts. First, whatever the provocation, the BJP has consistently refused to budge from the sangh parivar's stubborn conviction that Sikhs are part of the greater Hindu family. As long as Guru Govind Singh finds a place — along with Maharana Pratap and Shivaji — in the RSS pantheon of national heroes, it will be difficult to pressure the BJP into taking an anti-Sikh stand.

SCRIPSI

There is the rather melancholy consideration that the ideal at which the educated natives of India are aiming is absolutely unattainable. How can 180 millions of souls govern themselves? Responsible and representative government are terms without meaning when they are applied to such a multitude.

New Delhi needs to realise that all roads to Yeltsin's Moscow pass first through Washington

India must rebuild its Russia house

By HARI VASUDEVAN

In the appointment of Mr Ronen Sen as India's ambassador to Moscow, South Block has shown a long overdue determination to set right affairs at the legation on Ulitsa Obukha. New Delhi is aware that Mr Boris Yeltsin's government is here to stay for a while, that India needs something by way of a new Russia policy.

Russia's administration is in a shambles, the soviet is short on democratic credentials, public complaints are many, the economy is in a mess and the new nation lacks credibility. But with the odd shove from the US the current regime survives. It is impossible to ignore the events in what remain the most important influence on the Commonwealth of Independent States, a vast reservoir of natural resources and a major power.

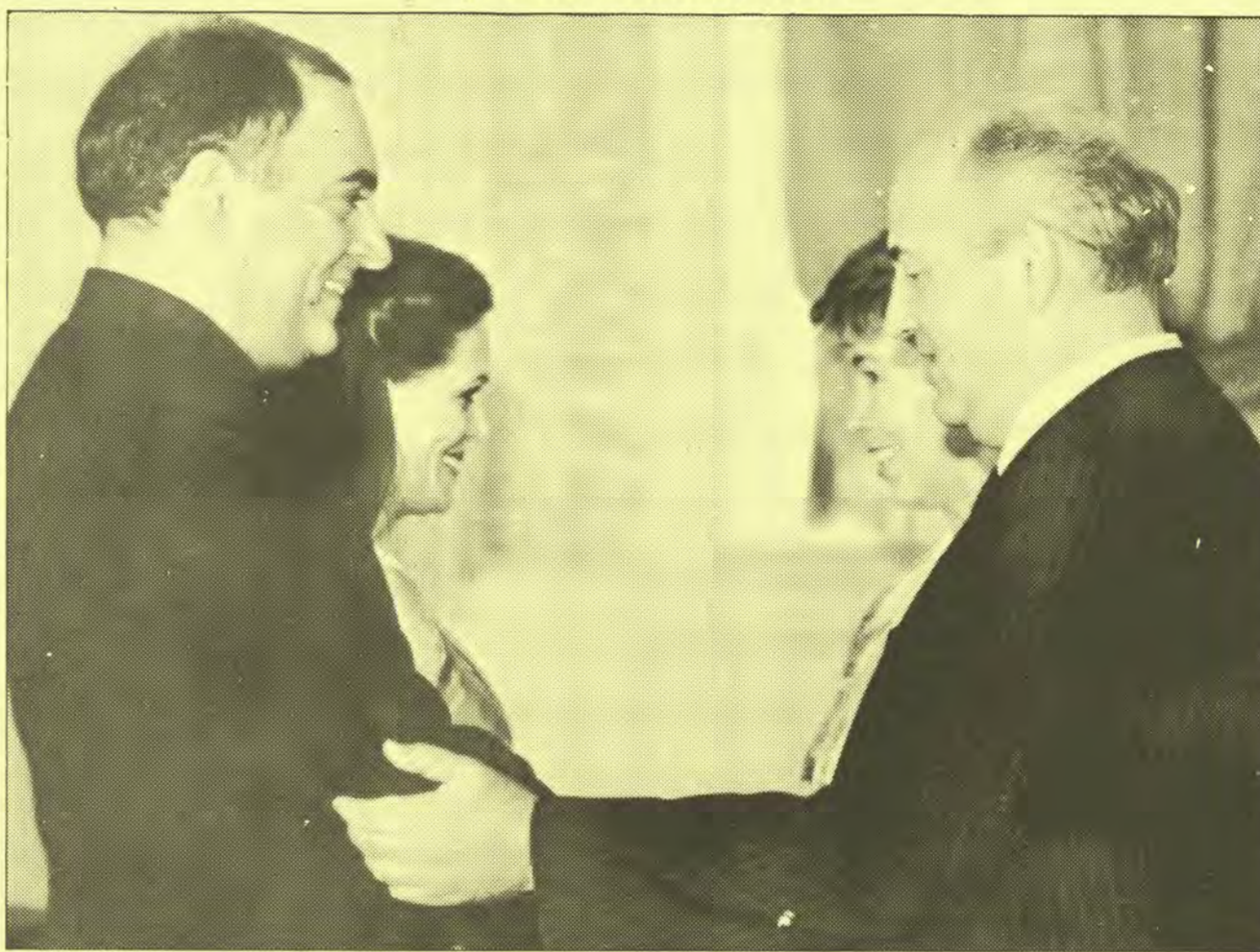
Indian businessmen have pointed to the need for decisive action by Indian officials in building good relations. There was, for example, a poor follow-up to the visit of the state secretary, Mr Gennady Burbulis. The moribund core of the Indian mission, centred around the former ambassador, stymied the best efforts of the embassy's cultural and economic sections to develop links in the new regime.

Mr Sen has access to only limited information on Russian affairs. The sudden availability of vast amounts of data has left Indian officials in a daze. The embassy has no informants in the numerous public agencies that have come up and lacks the ability to keep up with the commercial and political material in circulation. The desk at the ministry of external affairs cannot supplement the embassy's stock of biographical information about the Russian deputies or the manager-entrepreneurs of the day.

Most of India's old friends in Moscow have no position in the new policy making apparatus. When he took over the ministry of foreign affairs, Mr Andrei Kozirev rid the establishment of a number of deputy ministers and appointed his own team: Andrei Kolosovski, Feodor Shelova-Kovedyev, Boris Kolokolov, Georgi Kunadze and Georgi Mamedov.

Some had experience with Mr Eduard Shevardnadze, but most of the new appointees had come from the Russian ministry of external affairs, as opposed to the Soviet ministry. Some, like Mr Kozirev himself, quit the Soviet ministry for personal or professional reasons or came from independent think-tanks.

Officials sympathetic to Mr Gorbachev's policy of close relations with India, such as Mr Alexander Lukin, have been sent away from Moscow. Their attempt to sway the course of



Good old days

policy through personal influence or writings in the press are of limited value. They can hardly help Indian officials orient themselves in changed circumstances. Indian foreign service officers have failed to cultivate potential new allies like Mr Galina Starovoytova. He is an advisor to Mr Yeltsin and less obsessed with the US than Mr Kozirev.

Mr Sen cannot do without India's old friends and associates in Moscow — those once connected with the Communist Party, the friendship organisations, the Oriental Institute, old state trading organisations and so on. Though excluded from ministerial and parliamentary commissions, many of them are prominent in public life, professional organisations, local government and the press. Since Russian politics is in an uncertain state, there is doubt about who represents the country's interests.

Still, clear lines of communication with Mr Kozirev are essential. He holds no brief against India, although Mr Alfred Gonsalves's statements during and after the August 1991 coup angered Mr Kozirev's fellow Democrats. Mr Kozirev has ignored South Asian affairs in view of his enormous commitments elsewhere.

over nuclear weapons and aid. In the circumstances, Indo-Russian affairs have been of secondary concern to the Russian foreign ministry. Insofar as Russian officials express opinions — such as supporting Kashmiri self-determination — it is to reinforce democratic postures rather than an indication of cardinal principles of foreign policy.

To treat with Mr Kozirev requires attention and respect for the Washington-Moscow axis he and Mr Yeltsin have created. In their construction of Russia's foreign policy the US is their primary ally in international affairs. The close relations between the two countries has been amply demonstrated over the summer. Not only was Mr Yeltsin given a rousing welcome during his visit to the US, but President George Bush gave extraordinary support to Russia's dealings with the International Monetary Fund and G-7 despite the reservations of other Western nations.

Mr James Baker voiced the position of the US administration concerning Russia and the Yeltsin government at an event in Boston organised by the World Affairs Council in late June. His fulsome support for both was unqualified. Restating the importance of continuing with the principles of the Freedom Support Act passed by Congress in April, a law that expressed US plans to support democracy and the market economy in eastern Europe and the CIS, Mr Baker warned of a

possible recurrence of an arms race with Russia if the reforms failed and the Yeltsin government collapses. He emphasised that Mr Yeltsin was asking for "partnership", not charity. Partnership to build institutions and conventions which would eventually be beneficial both to Russians and Americans.

Senior US state department officials have given lectures in a similar vein at other occasions. To assist it with the task of improving relations with Russia the government has drawn members of the public into the Citizens' Democracy Corps. This group has been a clearing house for voluntary programmes and business ventures in the Soviet Union and the CIS since 1988. With such encouragement, US entrepreneurs have begun operations in Russia. Most recently, after Mr Yeltsin's visit, the Bush administration established special insurance for such businesses.

Democrats have expressed their reservations concerning the nature of the US commitment to Russia. Their reservations have been duly noted in the Russian press. But to date these remain lone voices and there is considerable argument between president and Congress over support for Russia.

South Block will instruct Mr Sen to convince Mr Kozirev that New Delhi's position on a number of international economic and political issues is in accord with the principles of the US-

Russian entente. The current economic reforms are major evidence of this. Conservative think-tanks in the US, like the Heritage Foundation, support such a reading of India's international postures. This will not be lost on Mr Kozirev.

The sympathy accorded to India's stand on the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in such circles and the hard thinking in the state department about possible rephrasing of the NPT to take India's views into account are not unknown to Mr Kozirev. Mr Sen will discover the recent Indo-US entente and the cooling of US relations with Pakistan will help him with his brief in Moscow.

It is Mr Sen's emphasis on India's refusal to have its international course dictated that Mr Kozirev will find difficult to accept. Mr Kozirev's views on Indo-Russian relations lack substance. Unless he draws in old professionals such as Messrs Anatoly Adamiashin, Alexi Obukhov and Victor Kompletov into his ministerial team, he will have difficulty in fully understanding Mr Sen. Clientism comes naturally to Mr Kozirev even if it does not come easily to the president and other members of the entourage. Mr Sen will find the going with him difficult.

Of course Mr Sen will not change his tune. He is aware that India's international assertion of its independence is not for negotiation. It is because India must be independent that she must rebuild her relations with Russia. The special trade and currency relationship with Russia — overturned after the Burbulis Protocol — is a potential source of stability in the difficult times ahead. Just as the relationship may be crucial to Russia when that country runs into a crisis, Mr Yeltsin understood this at the time of the controversy over the missile deal in May. Hence his refusal to give way over the issue in Washington in June. Mr Kozirev regrettably is not as wide awake.

Ironically, the solution to this problem lies in Washington. US officials do not wish to be the only ones to shoulder the burden of helping Russia. It was clear in Munich that the US's European allies were not keen on giving Mr Yeltsin a blank cheque. It is evident to Russia-watchers in the US that the greatest source of Russia's stability in the circumstances may be the country's special relationship with India, Mexico and so on. Trade with Russia in turn may be the best hope for the successful development of market-oriented reform in these nations.

In consequent discussions with Mr Kozirev, Mr Baker will probably stress the importance to Russia of its special relationships. This will surprise Mr Kozirev just as Mr Bush's encouragement to Mr Yeltsin to defy the IMF surprised the prime minister, Mr Igor Gaidar, in July. It will also enable Mr Sen to fulfil his brief.

The course of events will not be astonishing. Most avenues to Moscow pass through Washington. It is within the boundaries of the District of Columbia's beltway that most problems concerning Russia will be resolved.

LETTERS

Less taxing on the customer

Sir — The Ninth Finance Commission must pay some attention to the system of levying sales tax on consumer items so as to make sure it is in the interest of the consumer, the state government and the Centre. Sales tax evasion is a major revenue loss for states. The Centre loses income tax revenue because of unaccounted sales, done mainly to escape sales tax.

The commission must fix uniform sales tax rates for all states. Traders should be asked to issue cash memos with only the net payable price written on them. Sales tax can be levied on the basis of the net price charged by traders.

For instance, the present system of levying extra sales tax (say 10 per cent) on an item (say costing Rs 100) making the payable price Rs 110 may be altered. The price of the item could be fixed at Rs 110 and a sales tax of Rs 9 charged on it which would ensure a revenue for the government. This system will help preserve consumer rights of warranty too as they will not avoid taking a cash memo to shirk payment of sales tax.

Subhash Chandra Agrawal, Delhi

Unreserved bank

Sir — The securities scam has shaken the very foundation of the highest financial institution in the land. How the Reserve Bank of India as the controller of the nation's banking system could allow this fraud to take place is difficult to imagine. The finance minister, Mr Manmohan Singh, has zealously guarded the RBI governor declaring him innocent. Unless both the finance minister and the governor prove their "innocence" their names will remain under a cloud.

N. Bose, Ranchi

Sir — The stock-market scam has already exposed a Union minister. Much more may be revealed once the CBI inquiry ends. What is surprising is the government's ignorance of the fraud. The head offices of all banks and the LIC should be shifted to Delhi

for better monitoring of fiscal activities.

Yours faithfully,

Haridas Chakrabarti, Calcutta

Advocate's plea

Sir — The government should declare a Lawyers Day to show appreciation for the legal profession. Just like children, teachers, women and even doctors have their own special day, the lawyers deserve their own day as recognition for their great service and sacrifice.

Lawyers, in general, are deeply respected. They have always been quick to answer the call of duty, little caring for personal safety or gain. Rajendra Prasad, Motilal Nehru, Tej Bahadur Sapru, Chittaranjan Das, B.R. Ambedkar were all great men and lawyers. I would suggest the birth date of Rajendra Prasad be declared Lawyers Day.

Debananda Prasad Das, Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur

Wrongly maligned

Sir — This has reference to the news items, "High cost cancer instruments gathering dust," (July 5) and "Negligence stalls work at cancer institute," (July 20). The members of our association feel the reports have wrongly maligned some scientific departments and personalities of the institute. This could have been easily avoided by talking directly to the persons concerned.

The scientists of this institute earnestly solicit the cooperation and encouragement of the media for the pursuance of scientific endeavour to combat a dreadful disease like cancer.

Yours faithfully, Dr Manas Ranjan Ray, joint secretary and Dr Susanta Kumar Das, president, Chittaranjan National Cancer Research Centre Officers' Association, Calcutta

Polling booth irregulars

Voter apathy, voluntary or otherwise, has consistently undermined Indian democracy

The notion of majority is so basic to our awareness of the electoral mechanism that it is surprising such little effort has gone into studying its silence. The choice to vote A, B or C to a particular post also has an implied fourth choice — not to vote for any of them. Yet, it has been tacitly understood that those who do not speak up (i.e., choose any of the candidates) can safely be ignored. Non-expression within vox populi has been made synonymous with non-existence.

Of course, the rules of the game say the winner in an election is the person who gets the largest number of votes cast. The emphasis is on the votes cast. Constitution framers in India, as elsewhere, had allowed for some shrinkage of the electorate. It would have been utopian for them to have believed it possible to muster the entire electorate at any given point in time. But one wonders whether they had, while drawing the election rules, considered situations in which abstainers became the majority.

In 1983, Mr Hiteswar Saikia became the chief minister of Assam, heading a Congress government that received 52.5 per cent of the votes cast. However, barely 32.7 per cent of the electorate exercised its voting right. Mr Saikia, therefore, headed a government with the backing of about 15 per cent of the electorate and which 67.3 per cent of the electorate did not say they wanted.

During the 1992 election to the Punjab Assembly the voter turnout was even more dismal — approximately 24 per cent. The Congress won an absolute majority in the House by securing about 43.8 per cent of the votes cast. In absolute terms, however, it received less than half the number of votes the electorate chose not to cast.

Arguably, these two instances of shrunken electorates are hardly representative of the election process in a functional democracy and can be attributed in part to boycotts by the popular Opposition parties.

Yet, liberal democrat tradition would nearly always counsel holding elections in such troubled spots. The argument runs somewhat along these lines — if the people need to voice their grievances, it is better for all con-

cerned to have them channelled through a platform of elected representatives. So, the need for elections.

And if things go horribly wrong, as they have a tendency of doing, everyone can then blame the elected representatives. They have thus served their purpose. A fresh set — the "new vox populi?" — can always be found.

Something, however, gets lost in the scramble to find a voice for the people. The voter is left wondering who exactly do these representatives represent anyway?

Spectacularly farcical as it may

By DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYYA

sound in these isolated cases, such an idiosyncrasy on a national scale is cause for extreme concern. That this malady is not localised to exceptional situations is amply borne out by the Indian experience with general elections.

In the 1952 election to the Lok Sabha, the Indian National Congress was elected the majority party by winning 45 per cent of the votes cast. But only 45.7 per cent of the electorate cast its vote. So the party became the most popular choice by mustering about 25 per cent of the entire electorate's vote — less than half the number of people who voted for no party!

In 1984, the Congress came to power with 48.1 per cent of the votes cast. But 35.9 per cent of the electorate did not vote. Here, again, the ruling party had the backing of 30.83 per cent of the electorate, five per cent less than those who abstained.

In the Indian polity, silence of the majority seems more the rule than the exception. In fact, between 1952 and 1989, there has been no election to the Lok Sabha in which the governing party has received a mandate larger than those who chose none of the contestants.

It can be argued that the government is determined by its majority in the House and not by votes. Empirically, however, a positive correlation can be made out between votes and seats. Typically, the seat majority requirement has augmented the trend in favour of low mandates.

It is ironic that the majority in the world's most populous democracy has remained a silent bystander while choosing representatives.

In general, those who did not vote did not because either they did not want to or they wanted to but were not permitted to. The latter category includes those who found their time more profitably employed in doing some thing else along with those who were involuntarily disenfranchised. This last section is dependent on a host of causes, manipulation by political agents, not being the least of which.

The feeble inroads made into the study of disenfranchisement have, sadly, restricted themselves to the involuntary kind. Forcible disenfranchisement to ensure a majority requires the machinations of an external agency — be it the unorganised terror tactics of an individual, or the systematic doctoring of a political party.

To a dedicated student of such methods, elections in Bihar can provide illuminating, often spectacular, instances of the former, while West Bengal is a gold mine of information on the latter. Institutional factors like imperfect electoral rolls, incomplete census data, and the technology of vote casting also play a significant role in reducing the size of the electorate.

Inasmuch as systemic abuse can enhance voter apathy and vice versa, the study of forcible disenfranchisement helps in understanding the magnitude of the "stay away" attitude. But it would never do to let our research rest there. As a danger to the system, voluntary disenfranchisement offers far more sinister possibilities.

As long as India has to rely on an imported model of parliamentary democracy, it behooves our political masters to generate a degree of faith in the body politic about the system.

An externally imposed institution has a higher susceptibility to abuse than a system evolved within the society. But the most insidious aspect of voter apathy is that a significant amount of it can lead to a failure of the system itself. And it should not require elections in Punjab or Assam or Jammu and Kashmir to tell us that. It would be a pity if we remained deaf to the loudness of silence in our midst.