THE ELIXIR OF VICTORY

Gungi gudiya [dumb doll]
Ram Manohar Lohia on Indira Gandhi, circa 1967

I

IN NOVEMBER 1969 THE Delhi weekly *Thought* commented that 'the Congress seems to have written itself off as a nationally cohesive force'. The once-mighty party was now split into disputatious parts. When the next general election came, said *Thought*, 'Congressmen will be fighting Congressmen to the obvious advantage of regional or sectarian groups'. Consequently, 'Mrs Gandhi's party may not secure more than one-third of the seats in Parliament. The chances of the other group seem to be even slimmer.'[1]

A year later the prime minister called an election, fourteen months ahead of schedule. Her party – Congress (R) – wanted a popular mandate to implement the progressive reforms it had initiated, now held up by the 'reactionary' forces in Parliament. Its manifesto offered a 'genuine radical programme of economic and social development', upholding the interests of the small farmer and the landless labourer, and of the small entrepreneur against the big capitalist. It stood for the betterment of the lower castes, and for the protection of the minorities. Particular mention was made of the Urdu language, which 'shall be given its due place which has been denied to it so far'. It promised a 'strong and stable government', and asked for support in the fight against the 'dark and evil forces of right [wing] reaction', which were 'intent upon destroying the very base of our democratic and socialist objectives'.[2]

The position in which Indira Gandhi found herself in 1971 was in many ways reminiscent of her father's in 1952. Like Nehru then, Mrs Gandhi went to the polls having fought a bruising battle with members of her own party. Like him, she offered to the people a fresh, progressive-sounding mandate. And, like him, she was her party's chief campaigner and spokesperson, the very embodiment of what it said it stood for.

In calling an early poll, the prime minister had astutely dissociated the general election from elections to the various state assemblies which in the past had always taken place concurrently. That meant that parochial considerations of caste and ethnicity got mixed up with wider national questions. In 1967 this had proved to be detrimental to the Congress. This time, Mrs Gandhi made sure she would separate the two by calling a general election in which she could place a properly national agenda before the electorate.

The opposition, meanwhile, was seeking to build a united front against the ruling party. Urging it on was C. Rajagopalachari, now past ninety years of age. A common leader could not be agreed upon so, said 'Rajaji', the fight had to be conducted 'on the pattern of guerrilla warfare. Indira's candidates . . . must be opposed everywhere on the single ground that we oppose the conspiracy to tear up the constitution and to extinguish the people's liberties and put all power in the hands of the state'.[3]

The opposition constructed a 'Grand Alliance', bringing together Jana Sangh, Swatantra,

Congress (O), the socialists, and regional groupings. The idea was to limit the number of multiway contests. A copywriter came up with the slogan 'Indira Hatao' (Remove Indira). This prompted the telling rejoinder, offered from the lips of the prime minister herself: '*Wo kehte hain Indira Hatao, hum kehte hain Garibi Hatao*' (They ask for the Removal of Indira, whereas we want an End to Poverty itself).

Whether the work of the prime minister or one of her now forgotten minions, 'Garibi Hatao' was an inspired coinage. It allowed Congress (R) to take the moral high ground, representing itself as the party of progress, against an alliance of reaction. Personalizing the election was to backfire badly against the opposition, whose agenda was portrayed as negative in contrast to the forward-looking programme of the ruling party.

Mrs Gandhi worked tirelessly to garner votes for her party. Between the dissolution of Parliament, in the last week of December 1970, and the elections, held ten weeks later, she travelled 36,000 miles in all. She addressed 300 meetings and was heard or seen by an estimated 20 million people. These figures were recounted, with relish, in a letter written by Mrs Gandhi to an American friend. She clearly enjoyed the experience; as she remarked, 'it was wonderful to see the light in their [the people's] eyes'.[4]

The prime minister's speeches harped on the contrast, perceived and real, between the party she had left behind and the party she had founded. The 'old' Congress was in thrall to 'conservative elements' and 'vested interests', whereas the 'new' Congress was committed to the poor. Did not the nationalization of banks and the abolition of the privy purses show as much? The message struck a resonant chord, for, as one somewhat cynical journalist wrote:

> The man lying in a gutter prizes nothing more than the notion pumped into him that he is superior to the sanitary inspector. That the rich had been humbled looked like the assurance that the poor would be honoured. The instant 'poverty-removal' slogan was an economic absurdity. Psychologically and politically, for that reason, it was however a decisive asset in a community at war with reason and rationality.[5]

Her travels within India had made the prime minister far better known than she had been in 1967. In asking for votes, she exploited her 'charming personality', her 'father's historical role' and, above all, that stirring slogan 'Garibi Hatao'. The landless and low castes voted en masse for the Congress (R), as did the Muslims, who had been lukewarm the last time round. The new party's organizational weakness was remedied by its young volunteers, who went around the countryside amplifying their leader's words. The massive turnout on election day suggested that 'the people had been fired with a new hope of redemption'.[6]

Back in 1952 it had been said that even a lamp-post could win if it ran on the Congress symbol. It turned out that Mrs Gandhi's victory was even more spectacular than her father's. Congress (R) won 352 out of 518 seats; the next highest tally was that of the CPM, which won a mere 25. Both victor and vanquished agreed that this was chiefly the work of one person. As the writer Khush want Singh commented, 'Indira Gandhi has successfully magnified her figure as the one and only leader of national dimensions'. Then he added, ominously: 'However, if power is voluntarily surrendered by a predominant section of the people to one person and at the same time opposition is reduced to insignificance, the temptation to ride roughshod over legitimate criticism can become irresistible. The danger of Indira Gandhi being given unbridled power shall always be present.'[7]

Among the consequences of the 1971 election was a change in the name of the ruling party. The

Congress (R) now became known as Congress (I), for 'Indira'; later, even this was dropped. By the margin of its victory, Indira's Congress was confirmed as the real Congress, requiring no qualifying suffix.

Her success at the polls emboldened Mrs Gandhi to act decisively against the princes. Throughout 1971, the two sides tried and failed to find a settlement. The princes were willing to forgo their privy purses, but hoped at least to save their titles. But with her massive majority in Parliament, the prime minister had no need to compromise. On 2 December she introduced a bill seeking to amend the constitution and abolish all princely privileges. It was passed in the Lok Sabha by 381 votes to 6, and in the Rajya Sabha by 167 votes to 7. In her own speech, the prime minister invited 'the princes to join the elite of the modern age, the élite which earns respect by its talent, energy and contribution to human progress, all of which can only be done when we work together as equals without regarding anybody as of special status'.[8]

II

The statistics of the fifth general election were printed in loving detail in the report of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). The size of the electorate was 275 million, a 100 million up from the first edition in 1952. Yet no Indian had to walk more than two kilometres to exercise his or her franchise. There were now 342,944 polling stations, up 100,000 from 1962; each station was supplied with forty-three different items ranging from ballot papers and boxes to indelible ink and sealing wax; 282 million ballot papers were printed, 7 million more than the number of eligible voters (to allow for accidents and errors); 1,769,802 Indians were on polling duty – for the most part, these were officials of the state and central governments.

The CEC then turned, with less pleasure, to electoral malpractices. A study of the 1967 elections had found 375 cases of electoral violence of all kinds; of these, 98 were in Bihar.[9] In 1971 the Election Commission reported 66 instances of 'booth-capturing', where ballot boxes were seized by force and stuffed with ballots in favour of one candidate. In Anantnag in the Kashmir Valley a woman took away a ballot box under her *burqa* before returning it, now heavier by several hundred ballots. Again, the most violations were in Bihar – the state accounted for 52 of 66 booths captured by hooligans hired by leaders of caste factions. The CEC believed this was 'perhaps the most caste-ridden State in the whole [of] India and this bane of excessive casteism vitiates in no mean degree the political atmosphere'.

These disfigurements notwithstanding, the holding of its fifth general election was a matter on which the country could congratulate itself. So wrote the CEC, in a preface whose lyricism sat oddly with the hard nosed numerical analysis that followed. For in between the last poll and this one, 'India was in the middle of the deepest and darkest woods and was groping for a way out'. Factionalism was rife; SVD governments came and went, and the president of the republic died, making 'the already dark political situation . . . darker'. Then the mighty Congress Party split; this, in the CEC's view, was comparable only to 'the Great Schism in the Whig Party in Great Britain in the year 1796'. In this 'state of tension, stress, confusion and flux, the prophets of doom, both inside and outside the country, started expressing serious misgivings and doubts as to the very survival of democracy in this Great Land'.

These doomsayers, said the chief election commissioner, had not reckoned with Bharata Bhagya Vidhata (The Supreme Dispenser of India's Destiny), which from 'ancient times' had thwarted

'adverse and hostile circumstances', by blowing 'into the soul of India that elixir-giving inspiration which imparted rejuvenated vigour to her vital, moral and spiritual forces'. Others might have disagreed, seeing the holding of this election not as a victory for Indian spiritualism but as a vindication of that very modern political form, electoral democracy.[10]

III

Three months before India held its fifth general election, Pakistan held its first ever election based on adult franchise. The poll had been called by General Yahya Khan, Ayub Khan's successor as president and chief martial law administrator.

Two parties dominated the campaign; Zulfiqar Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party in West Pakistan, and the National Awami League of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman ('Mujib') in East Pakistan. The son of a large landowner, educated at Oxford and Berkeley, Bhutto sought to declass himself, at least rhetorically, by promising every Pakistani *roti, kapda aur makaan* (food, clothing and a roof over your heads). Mujib's campaign was based on East Pakistan's sense of victimhood, its anger at the suppression of the Bengali language and the exploitation of its rich natural resources by the military rulers of the western half of the country.[11]

Yahya Khan appears to have called for elections in the hope that Bhutto's PPP would win, and allow him to continue as president. The polls were held in the third week of December 1970. The PPP won 88 out of the 144 seats in West Pakistan, whereas the Awami League swept the more populous East, winning 167 of its 169 seats. These results surprised Mujibur Rahman, and shocked Yahya Khan. For the president had intended that the newly elected assembly would frame a democratic constitution; the worry now was that the Awami League, with its majority, would insist on a federation where the eastern wing would manage its own affairs, leaving only defence and foreign policy to the central government. Mujib had already indicated that he would like East Pakistan to have control over the foreign exchange its products generated, and perhaps issue its own currency as well.

Yahya's reservations were reinforced by the ambitions of Bhutto. For the relationship between Pakistan's two wings had always been a colonial one, with West dominating East militarily, economically and even culturally. For both general and patrician, the prospect of having a Bengali decide their destinies was too horrible to contemplate. For the Bengali Muslim was regarded by his West Pakistani counterpart as effete and effeminate, and too easily corrupted by proximity to Hindus (over 10 million of whom still lived within their midst). Among these Hindus were many professionals – lawyers, doctors, university professors. The fear of the West Pakistani elite was that, if Mujib's Awami League came to form the government, 'the constitution to be adopted by them will have Hindu iron hand in it'.[12]

On the other side, the East Pakistani Muslims looked upon their West Pakistani counterparts as 'the ruling classes, as foreign ruling classes and as predatory foreign ruling classes'. They resented the rulers' dismissal of their language, Bengali; they complained that their agricultural wealth was being drained away to feed the western sector; and they noted that Bengalis were very poorly represented in the upper echelons of the Pakistani bureaucracy, judiciary and, not least, army. The feeling of being discriminated against had been growing over the years. By the time of the elections of 1970, 'the politically minded' East Bengali had become 'allergic to a central authority located a thousand miles away'.[13]

In January 1971 Yahya Khan and Bhutto travelled separately to the East Pakistani capital, Dacca. They held talks with Mujib, but found him firm on the question of a federal constitution. The president then postponed the convening of the National Assembly. The Awami League answered by calling an indefinite general strike. Throughout East Pakistan shops and offices putdown their shutters; even railways and airports closed down. Clashes between police and demonstrators became a daily occurrence.

The military decided to quell these protests by force. Troop reinforcements were flown in or sent by ship to the principal eastern port, Chittagong. On the night of 25/26 March, the army launched a major attack on the university, whose students were among the Awami League's strongest supporters. A parade of tanks rolled into the campus, firing on the dormitories. Students were rounded up, shot and pushed into graves hastily dug and bulldozed over by tanks. There were troop detachments at work in other parts of the city, targeting Bengali newspaper offices and homes of local politicians. That same night Mujibur Rahman was arrested at his home and flown off to a secret location in West Pakistan.[14]

The Pakistan army fanned out into the countryside, seeking to stamp out any sign of rebellion. East Bengali troops mutinied in several places, including Chittagong, where one major captured a radio station and announced the establishment of the Independent People's Republic of Bangladesh.[15] To combat the guerrillas the army raised bands of local loyalists, called Razakars, who put the claims of religion – and hence of a united Pakistan – above those of language. Villages and small towns, even the odd airport, fell into rebel hands, then were recaptured. The reprisals grew progressively more brutal. As an American consular official reported, 'Army officials and soldiers give every sign of believing that they are now embarked on a Jehad against Hindu-corrupted Bengalis.'[16]

One soldier later wrote a vivid recollection of the counter-insurgency operations, of the 'reassertion of state power' and the capture of those 'places [which] had been occupied by anti-state elements'. As he remembered, 'there was more resistance offered by the terrain than by the miscreants. Extensive damage to land communications and free intermingling of hostiles with the general populace made progress tedious.'[17]

After the first swoop, foreign correspondents were asked to leave East Pakistan, but later in the summer some were allowed to return. A German journalist saw signs of the civil war everywhere: in bazaars burnt in the cities and homesteads razed in the villages. There was 'a ghostly emptiness in settlements once bubbling with life and energy'. An American reporter found Dacca 'a city under the occupation of a military force that rules by strength, intimidation and terror'. The army was harassing the Hindu minority in particular; the authorities were 'demolishing Hindu temples, regardless of whether there are any Hindus to use them'. A World Bank team visiting East Pakistan found a 'general destruction of property in cities, towns, and villages', leading to an 'all-pervasive fear' among the population.[18]

The army action in Dacca sparked a panic flight out of the city. The repression in the hinterland magnified this flight, directing it across the border into India. By the end of April 1971 there were half a million East Pakistan refugees in India; by the end of May, three and a half million; by the end of August, in excess of 8 million. Most (though by no means all) were Hindus.[19] Refugee camps were strung out along the border, in the states of West Bengal, Tripura and Meghalaya. To distribute the burden, camps were also opened in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The refugees were housed in huts made of bamboo and polythene; the luckier ones in the verandahs of schools and colleges. The food came from Indian warehouses – not as bare as they would have been before the Green Revolution – and from supplies provided by Western aid agencies.[20]

From the beginning, the Indian government had followed an 'open door' policy; anyone who came was allowed in. Significantly, the responsibility for the camps vested with the centre, not the states. In fact, from the beginning of the conflict New Delhi had taken a very keen interest in the future of what was already being referred to in secret official communications as the 'struggle for Bangladesh'. On the other side, Islamabad spoke darkly of 'an Indo-Zionist plot against Islamic Pakistan'.[21] This was an exaggeration; for the origins of the problem were internal to Pakistan, while Israel was nowhere in the picture at all. Still, once the dispute presented itself, India was not above stoking it for its own ends.

A key player here was the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), an intelligence agency set up in 1968 on the model of the CIA, its aims the pursuit of Indian interests worldwide, its activities screened from parliamentary enquiry, its orders to report directly to the Prime Minister's Office. The head of RAW was (perhaps inevitably) a Kashmiri Brahmin, R. N. Kao, while its officers were taken from the police and, on occasion, the army. No sooner had the Pakistani elections been called than RAW was being kept busy writing reports on that country. A memorandum of January 1971 presented a somewhat alarmist picture of Pakistan's armed strength: listing numbers of troops, tanks, aircraft and ships, it claimed that the country had 'achieved a good state of military preparedness for any confrontation with India'. It thought the 'potential threat' of an attack on India 'quite real, particularly in view of the Sino-Pakistan collusion'. Besides, the constitutional crisis might encourage the generals to undertake a diversionary adventure, to begin, as in 1965, with an 'infiltration campaign in Jammu and Kashmir'.[22]

Whether Yahya Khan had any such plans in January 1971 only the Pakistani archives can reveal. The archives on the Indian side tell us that India had certain designs of its own, aimed naturally at Pakistan. Thinking through these designs were P. N. Haksar and his colleague D. P. Dhar, then Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union. In April 1971 Dhar wrote to Haksar expressing pleasure that India was winning the propaganda war with Pakistan – chiefly by providing succour to the victims of its repression. Some analysts wanted swift military action but, advised Dhar, instead of 'policies and programmes of impetuosity', what India had to plan for 'is not an immediate defeat of the highly trained [army] of West Pakistan; we have to create the whole of East Bengal into a bottomless ditch which will suck the strength and resources of West Pakistan. Let us think in terms of a year or two, not in terms of a week or two.'[23]

IV

By the summer of 1971, along with the hundreds of camps for refugees, India was also hosting training camps for Bengali guerrillas. Known as the Mukti Bahini, these fighters numbered some 20,000 in all; regular officers and soldiers of the once united Pakistani army, plus younger volunteers learning how to use light arms. The instruction was at first in the hands of the paramilitary Border Security Force, but by the autumn the Indian army had assumed direct charge. From their bases in India, the guerrillas would venture into East Pakistan, there to attack army camps and disrupt communications.[24]

In April 1971 the Chinese prime minister wrote to the Pakistani president deploring the 'gross interference' by India in the 'internal problems' of his country. He dismissed the resistance as the work of 'a handful of persons who want to sabotage the unification of Pakistan'. He assured Yahya Khan that 'should the Indian expansionists dare to launch aggression against Pakistan, the Chinese

Government and people will, as always, support the Pakistan Government and people in their just struggle to safeguard state sovereignty and national independence'.[25]

Chou En-lai's letter was reproduced in the Pakistani press, and must certainly have been read across the border as well. Meanwhile, New Delhi dispatched senior Cabinet ministers to countries in Europe and Africa, to speak there of the unfolding tragedy, and India's efforts to manage it. The prime minister wrote to world leaders urging them to rein in the Pakistani army. In the first week of July 1971 Dr Henry Kissinger – at the time national security adviser to President Nixon – met Mrs Gandhi in New Delhi, where he was acquainted for the first time with 'the intensity of feelings on the East Bengal issue'. The refugee influx had placed a great burden on India – 'we were holding things together by sheer will-power', said the prime minister. The crisis could be resolved only when 'a settlement which satisfied the people of East Bengal was reached with their true leaders'. America was asked to press such a settlement on the military rulers of West Pakistan.[26]

From New Delhi, Kissinger proceeded to Islamabad, and from there – in secret – to the Chinese capital, Peking. Pakistan had brokered this breaking of the ice between two countries long hostile to one another. Their help with China was another reason for the United States to stand solidly behind the generals in Islamabad. Thus Kissinger had carried a letter from Nixon to Mrs Gandhi, asking her to help in the peaceful return of the refugees and the maintenance of Pakistan as a united entity. In a combative reply, the prime minister lamented the fact that arms supplied by the Americans to Pakistan, directed in 1965 against India, were now 'being used against their own people, whose only fault appears to be that they took seriously President Yahya Khan's promises to restore democracy'. The president had asked for UN observers to supervise refugee repatriation but, asked Mrs Gandhi, 'would the League of Nations observers have succeeded in persuading the refugees who fled from Hitler's tyranny to return even whilst the pogroms against the Jews and political opponents of Nazism continued unabated?'[27]

Recently declassified documents point to a distinct difference of perspective between President Nixon and his chief adviser. The historian in Kissinger could foresee that 'there will some day be an independent Bangla Desh'. He also sensed – as he told the Indian ambassador to Washington – that while 'India was a potential world power, Pakistan would always be a regional power'.

Nixon, however, laid hopes on a military solution to the East Bengal problem. He had a deep dislike of one country – 'the Indians are no goddamn good', he told Kissinger – and a sentimental attachment to the leader of the other. In Nixon's opinion, Yahya Khan was 'a decent and reasonable man', whose loyalty to the US had to be rewarded by supporting his suppression of the East Bengal revolt. When, in April 1971, Kissinger prepared a note suggesting that the future for East Pakistan was 'greater autonomy and, perhaps, eventual independence', the president scribbled on it: 'Don't squeeze Yahya at this time'.

As Kissinger somewhat despairingly told a colleague, 'the President has a special feeling for President Yahya. One cannot make policy on that basis, but it is a fact of life.' Nixon expressed his prejudices forcefully: speaking to his staff in August 1971 he said that, while the Pakistanis were 'straightforward', if 'sometimes extremely stupid', the 'Indians are more devious, sometimes so smart that we fall for their line'. The president insisted that the US 'must not – cannot – allow India to use the refugees as a pretext for breaking up Pakistan'.[28]

As India drew apart from one superpower, it was coming closer to the other.[29] Moscow concurred with New Delhi's assessment that the 'twains of East and West Pakistan are not likely to meet again'. The USSR and India were now contemplating closer economic co-operation, through a greater flow of raw materials and finished goods between the two countries. As an inducement, the

Russians offered to sell the Indian air force a number of their TU-22 bombers. Recommending the proposal, the Indian ambassador, D. P. Dhar, admitted that while these were inferior to Western models, to buy the planes from a NATO country would involve conditions that were both 'politically unacceptable and financially prohibitive'.[30]

In June1971 the Indian foreign minister, Sardar Swaran Singh, was due to visit Moscow. On the eve of his arrival the Soviet Foreign Ministry approached D. P. Dhar with the suggestion that the USSR and India sign a treaty of friendship, which would 'act as a strong deterrent to force Pakistan and China to abandon any idea of military adventure'. Dhar was told that 'India need not be worried about Pakistan, but should take into account the unpredictable enemy from the North' (i.e. China).[31] Later, when the two foreign ministers met, the common suspicion of China figured high on the agenda. Swaran Singh remarked that China was the only country to give 'all out, full and unequivocal support' to the Pakistani military regime. Andrei Gromyko answered that 'the Chinese are always against whatever the USSR stands for. Any cause which we support invites their opposition and anything which we consider unworthy of our support secures their support. I cannot think of any particular exception to this general rule.'[32]

Indian hostility to China dated back to the border conflict of 1959–62. Soviet hostility was more recent, a product of rivalry for leadership of the world communist movement. Mao Zedong had spoken sneeringly of 'Russian revisionism'; the armies of the two sides had clashed on the Uri river in 1969. India and the Soviet Union did not touch one another at any point, but each had a very long border with China. A closer alliance was in the interest of both. The secret documents quoted above, however, reveal that, contrary to the received wisdom, the alliance was first suggested not by the poor underdeveloped country but by the powerful superpower.

After meeting Gromyko, Swaran Singh discussed a possible treaty with the chairman of the USSR Praesidium, Alexei Kosygin. Drafts were exchanged before a final document was signed in New Delhi on 9 August 1971 by the foreign ministers of the two sides. For the most part, the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation between the Republic of India and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was pure boilerplate: declarations of undying friendship between the 'High Contracting Parties'. The crux lay in a single sentence of Article IX, to wit:

> In the event of either Party being subjected to an attack or a threat thereof, the High Contracting Parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultations in order to remove such threat and to take appropriate effective measures to ensure peace and the security of their countries.[33]

By the late summer of 1971, the axes of alliance on the subcontinent were pretty clear: on the one side, there was (West) Pakistan with China and the United States; on the other, (East) Pakistan with India and the Soviet Union.

V

In the last week of September 1971 the prime minister travelled to the Soviet Union. The next month she visited a series of Western cities, ending in the capital of the free world. Everywhere, she spoke of the deepening crisis in East Pakistan. As she told the National Press Club in Washington, this was 'not a civil war, in the ordinary sense of the word; it is a genocidal punishment of civilians for having

voted democratically'. 'The suppression of democracy is the original cause of all the trouble in Pakistan,' she said, adding, 'If democracy is good for you, it is good for us in India, and it is good for the people of East Bengal.'[34]

On her November visit Mrs Gandhi had two meetings with President Nixon. Kissinger had the impression that this was 'a classic dialogue of the deaf'. Nixon said that the US would not be a party to the overthrow of Yahya Khan, and warned India that 'the consequences of military action were incalculably dangerous'. Mrs Gandhi answered that it was the Pakistanis who spoke of waging a 'holy war'. She also pointed out that while the West Pakistanis had 'dealt with the Bengali people in a treacherous and deceitful way and . . . always relegated them to an inferior role', India, 'on the other hand, has always reflected a degree of forbearance toward its own separatist elements'.[35]

While Mrs Gandhi was away, the conflict had intensified. From the end of October the shelling along the border became more fierce, encouraged by the Indian army, which saw the exchanges as a cover for insurgents to creep in and out. By the third week of November heavy artillery was in action. In a battle on the 21st the Pakistanis were said to have lost up to thirteen tanks.[36] Reporting this to Nixon, Yahya Khan complained that India had 'chosen the path of unabashed and unprovoked aggression'. Twelve Indian divisions were massed near East Pakistan, seeking to turn 'localized attacks to open and large-scale warfare'.[37]

At this time in their history, the armies of the two sides were grossly mismatched. In the past decade the Indian armed forces had augmented its equipment, modernized its organization and laid the foundations of an indigenous weapons industry. While Indian intelligence had exaggerated Pakistani strength, a study by the International Institute of Strategic Studies showed that India in fact had twice as many tanks and artillery guns as its neighbour. Further, the morale of the Pakistan army had been deeply affected by the civil war, by the defection of Bengali officers and the effect of having to fight those presumed to be one's own people.[38]

In the event it was the weaker side that sought to seize the initiative. On the afternoon of 3 December Pakistani bombers attacked airfields all along the western border. Simultaneously, seven regiments of artillery attacked positions in Kashmir.

The Indians retaliated with a series of massive air strikes. In Kashmir and Punjab they answered back on the ground while, in the seas beyond, the navy saw action for the first time, moving towards Karachi. The eruption of conflict in the west provided the perfect excuse for India to move its troops and tanks across the border into East Pakistan, turning a shadowy struggle into a very open one.[39]

Yahya Khan's decision to attack India from the west was, at first and subsequent glance, somewhat surprising; a military historian has even described it as 'barely credible'.[40] Perhaps the Pakistanis hoped to effect quick strikes, calling for UN or American intervention before the conflict got out of hand. Some generals in Islamabad also believed that succour would come from the Chinese. Thus, on 5 December, the commander of the Pakistani troops in East Pakistan, Lieutenant General A. A. K. Niazi, received a message from Army Headquarters informing him that there was 'every hope of Chinese activities very soon'.[41]

Such help may not have come anyway, but in December it was made impossible by the snows that covered the Himalaya. This, indeed, was the perfect season for the Indians to effect their march on Dacca. Three months earlier the rains from the monsoon would have made the ground soft underfoot; three months later the Chinese would have had the option of crossing into the border area they shared with India and East Pakistan. The weather was in favour of the Indians, as was the support of the local population; this to add to an overwhelming superiority in numbers.

The Indian army moved towards Dacca from four different directions. The delta was criss-

crossed by rivers, but the Mukti Bahini knew where best to lay bridges, and which town housed what kind of enemy contingent. The Bahini was in turn helped by their civilian comrades: as the Pakistani Commander was to recall later, 'the Indian Army knew of all our battle positions, down to the last bunker, through the locals'.[42] Their path thus smoothed, the Indians made swift progress. Communications were snapped between Dacca and the other main city, Chittagong. Vital rail heads were captured, rendering the defenders immobile.[43]

On 6 December the government of India officially revealed an intention it had long nurtured – namely, to support and catalyse the formation of a new nation-state to replace the old East Pakistan. On this day it formally recognized 'The Provisional Government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh'. In Mujibur Rahman's absence, Syed Nazrul Islam served as acting president of the new state; he had a full-fledged Cabinet in tow. These men were to the Indians as de Gaulle's Free French forces had been to the Allies; waiting, not very patiently, while Big Brother recaptured their beloved city and handed it over to them. Within a week of war the Indian troops were within striking distance of Dacca. Artillery fire rained down on the city, with troops advancing from the north, south and east. A temporary hiccup was provided by an aircraft carrier of the American 7th Fleet, which moved into the Bay of Bengal, by means – to quote Henry Kissinger – of 'registering our position'.[44]

The threat was an idle one. Tied down in Vietnam, the Americans could scarcely jump into another war which might – given the Indo-Soviet Treaty – get horribly out of hand. As the collapse of Dacca became imminent, an argument broke out between East Pakistan's civilian governor, who wanted to surrender, and the general in command of the besieged troops, who wanted to fight on. On 9 December, the governor sent a telegram to Islamabad asking them to sue for an 'immediate ceasefire and political settlement'. Otherwise, 'once Indian troops are free from East Wing in a few days even West Wing will be in jeopardy'. He considered the 'sacrifice of West Pakistan meaningless', noting that 'General Niazi does not agree as he considers that his orders are to fight to the last and it would amount to giving up Dhaka'.[45]

The governor's views were independently confirmed by Pakistan's two main allies, China and the United States. On the 10th, Kissinger met ambassador Huang Hua in Washington. The Chinese diplomat bitterly remarked that the creation of Bangladesh would create a 'new edition of Manchukuo', an Indian puppet regime on the model of the one the Japanese had once run in China. Kissinger replied that 'it is our judgement, with great sorrow, that the Pakistan army in two weeks will disintegrate in the West as it has disintegrated in the East'. 'We are looking for a way to protect what is left of Pakistan,' he said, adding by way of consolation, 'We will not recognize Bangla Desh. We will not negotiate with Bangla Desh.'[46]

On the night of the 13th, the Indians bombed the house of the governor in Dacca. The same night Niazi received a message from Yahya Khan advising him to lay down arms, as 'further resistance is not humanly possible'. The general waited a full day before deciding he had no choice but to obey. On the morning of the 15th he met the American consul general, who a greed to convey a message to New Delhi. The next day, the 16th, Lieutenant General J. S. Aurora of the Indian army's Eastern Command flew into Dacca to accept a signed instrument of surrender.[47] That same evening the prime minister made an announcement in the Lok Sabha that 'Dacca is now the free capital of a free country'. 'Long Live Indira Gandhi' shouted the Congress members, while even an opposition MP was heard to say that 'the name of the prime minister will go down in history as the golden sword of liberation of Bangla Desh'.[48] From Parliament Mrs Gandhi went to the studios of All-India Radio, where she announced a unilateral ceasefire on the western front. Twenty-four hours later General Yahya Khan spoke over the radio, saying he had instructed his troops to cease firing as well.[49]

The war had lasted a little less than two weeks. The Indians claimed to have lost 42 aircraft against Pakistan's 86, and 81 tanks against their 226.[50] But by far the largest disparity was in the number of prisoners. In the western sector, each side took a few thousand POWs, but in the east the Indians had now to take charge of around 90,000 Pakistani soldiers.

Less than pleased with the outcome of the war was President Richard Nixon. 'The Indians are bastards anyway', he told Henry Kissinger. 'Pakistan thing makes your heartsick', he said. 'For them to be done so by the Indians and after we had warned the bitch.' Nixon wondered whether, when Mrs Gandhi had visited Washington in November, he had not been 'too easy on the goddamn woman' – it seems to have been a mistake to have 'really slobbered over the old witch'. By this time even Kissinger had been turned off the Indians. He was cross with himself for having underestimated their military strength – 'The Indians are such poor pilots they can't even get off the ground,' he had claimed in October. His hope now was that 'the liberals are going to look like jerks because the Indian occupation of East Pakistan is going to make the Pakistani one look like child's play.'[51]

As for the American press, *Time* magazine even-handedly blamed both sides; Yahya's 'murderous rampage against rebellious Bengalis', along with Indira's launching of 'full-scale warfare', had together 'brought more suffering to the sub-continent'. However, the influential *New York Times* columnist James (Scotty) Reston took a more partisan line, writing a brooding, almost conspiratorial piece which saw the Soviet Union as the real beneficiary from 'this squalid tragedy'. Its new ally India would 'provide access to Moscow's rising naval power to the Indian Ocean, and abase of political and military operations on China's southern flank'. 'The Soviet Union now has the possibility of bases in India', claimed Reston. He thought this country's experiment with democracy was in peril, wondering whether 'India will be able to encourage independence for one faction in Pakistan without encouraging independence for other factions in India itself, including the powerful Communist faction in the Indian state of Kerala'.[52]

VI

The victory over Pakistan unleashed a huge wave of patriotic sentiment. It was hailed as 'India's first military victory in centuries',[53] speaking in terms not of India the nation, but of India the land mass and demographic entity. In the first half of the second millennium a succession of foreign armies had come in through the north-west passage to plunder and conquer. Later rulers were Christian rather than Muslim, and came by sea rather than overland. Most recently, there had been that crushing defeat at the hands of the Chinese. For so long used to humiliation and defeat, Indians could at last savour the sweet smell of military success.

On the other side of the border the view was all too different. After the news came that their troops had surrendered, an Urdu newspaper in Lahore wrote that 'today the entire nation weeps tears of blood . . . Today the Indian Army has entered Dacca. Today for the first time in 1,000 years Hindus have won a victory over Muslims . . . Today we are prostrate with dejection.' Within days, however, the Urdu press was seeking consolation from the lessons of history. While the defeat was certainly 'a breach in the fortress of Islam', even the great Muhammad of Ghori had lost his first war in the subcontinent. But as another Lahore newspaper reminded its readers, Ghori had come back 'with renewed determination to unfurl the banner of Islam over the Kafir land of India'.[54]

In India, credit for the victory was shared by countless mostly unnamed soldiers and a single specific politician – the prime minister. Mrs Gandhi was admired for standing up to the bullying

tactics of the United States, and for so coolly planning the dismemberment of the enemy. Her parliamentary colleagues went overboard in their salutations, but even opposition politicians were now speaking of her as 'Durga', the all-conquering goddess of Hindu mythology. The intellectual and professional classes, usually so sceptical of politics and politicians, were also generous in their praise of the prime minister.

Representative of this mood of all-round admiration was a symposium on the Bangladesh liberation organized by the Gandhi Peace Foundation in New Delhi. This began with the editor of the *Times of India*, Girilal Jain, speaking of how 'India's self-esteem and image in the world have improved considerably as are sult of the revival of the fortunes of the Congress Party under Mrs Indira Gandhi's leadership'. It continued with the RSS ideologue K. R. Malkani terming 1971 'a watershed in the political evolution of India'. With the events of that year, 'the old image of peace is being replaced by the new one of power. The old image only elicited patronizing smiles; the new image commands attention, and respect.' Then the diplomat G. L. Mehta claimed that 'the people have a new sense of self-confidence and not an unreasonable pride over its newly won prestige in the world'. The left-wing journalist Romesh Thapar concurred: the 'success of the Bangla Desh policy', he remarked, had given 'the thinking Indian a sense of achievement and power'. The left-wing jurist V. R. Krishna Iyer saw in the recent events a progressive maturation of Indian leadership: 'What in Gandhian days was a vague creed was spelt out in Nehru's time as an activist social philosophy, and became, under Mrs Gandhi's leadership, a concrete and dynamic programme of governmental action.'[55]

Away from India, Mrs Gandhi's calmness in a crisis was also admired by a woman who had seen some history in her time, the philosopher Hannah Arendt. In early November Arendt met the prime minister at the home of a mutual friend in New York. A month later, with Indian troops advancing on Dacca, she wrote to the novelist Mary McCarthy of how, at that party, she saw Mrs Gandhi, 'very good-looking, almost beautiful, very charming, flirting with very man in the room, without chichi, and entirely calm – she must have known already that she was going to make war and probably enjoyed it even in a perverse way. The toughness of these women once they have got what they want is really something!' [56]

VII

The prime minister, and her party, naturally sought to make political capital of what the soldiers had accomplished. In March 1972 fresh elections were called in thirteen states, some of which had opposition governments; others, uneasy Congress-led coalitions. In all thirteen, the Congress won comfortably. These included such crucial states as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. As the Jana Sangh leader Atal Behari Vajpayee ruefully remarked, while the opposition had put up 2,700 separate candidates, the ruling party had in effect fielded the same person in every constituency – Indira Gandhi.[57]

However, in at least one state the presence and example of the prime minister was not enough. This was West Bengal, where the Congress won only with resort to a mixture of terror, intimidation and fraud. Gangs of hooligans stuffed ballot boxes with the police idly looking on. There was 'mass-scale rigging' in Calcutta; as one activist recalled, *goondas* paid by the Congress told voters assembled outside polling stations that they might as well go home, since they had already cast all the registered votes.[58] Now in alliance with the CPI, the Congress captured 251 out of the 280 seats in the

assembly, ending five years of political instability and bringing the state firmly within the ambit of New Delhi.

Her domestic rule secured, the prime minister turned her attention to a settlement with Pakistan. Yahya Khan had resigned, and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto stepped in to take his place. Bhutto told the former British prime minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home that he was keen to forge 'an entirely new relationship with India', beginning with a summit meeting with Mrs Gandhi. The message was passed on, with the advice that in view of Pakistan's wounded pride, the invitation should come from India.[59]

The Indians were at first apprehensive, given Bhutto's unpredictability and history of animosity against India. Confidants of the Pakistani president rushed to assure them of his good intentions. The economist Mahbub ul Haq told an Indian counterpart that Bhutto was now 'in a very chastened and realistic mood'.[60] The journalist Mazhar Ali Khan, editor of *Dawn*, told his fellow ex-communist the Indian Sajjad Zaheer that Bhutto was honestly trying to forget the past. New Delhi should work to strengthen his hand, otherwise the army and the religious right would gang up to remove him, an outcome that would be disastrous for both India and Pakistan.[61]

Zaheer and Khan had worked together in pre-Partition days as fellow activists of the Student Federation of India. Now, encouraged by their former fellow-traveller P. N. Haksar, they met in London in the third week of March 1972 to discuss the terms of a possible agreement between their two national leaders. Khan's suggestions included are turn of all Pakistani POWs in return for its recognition of Bangladesh, troop withdrawal to positions held before the conflict, and a joint declaration of peace. Coming finally to Kashmir, Khan said that the dispute should 'not be mentioned at all in the declaration as this will open a Pandora's box'. Zaheer answered that 'India must get an assurance that there will be no more attack, infiltration, subversion, anti-India propaganda in Kashmir by Pak[istan]'. Khan agreed, but said that this 'should be demanded by India *in practice*. He said we should realise that no Government in Pak[istan] can survive if it renounces, outright, its support to Kashmiris' right of self-determination.'[62]

Khan reported on these talks directly to Bhutto, while Zaheer conveyed them via P. N. Haksar to Mrs Gandhi. The Pakistani president was invited for a summit to beheld in the old imperial summer capital of Simla in the last week of June 1972. He came accompanied by his daughter Benazir and a fairly large staff. First the officials met, and then their leaders. The Indians wanted a comprehensive treaty to settle all outstanding problems (including Kashmir); the Pakistanis preferred a piece meal approach. At a private meeting Bhutto told Mrs Gandhi that he could not go back to his people 'empty-handed'. The Pakistanis bargained hard. The Indians wanted a 'no-war pact'; they had to settle for a mutual 'renunciation of force'. The Indians asked for a 'treaty'; what they finally got was an 'agreement'. India said that they could wait for a more propitious moment to solve the Kashmir dispute, but asked for an agreement that the 'line of control shall be respected by both sides'. Bhutto successfully pressed a cave at: 'Without prejudice to the recognised position of either side'.[63]

One of Mrs Gandhi's key advisers, D. P. Dhar, wanted her to insist on 'the settlement of the Kashmiri issue as an integral and irreducible content of a settlement with Pakistan', and to make this a precondition for the repatriation of POWs.[64] Dhar was a *cent per cent* Kashmiri, born and raised in the Valley. The prime minister, Kashmiri by distant origin only, felt less strongly on the subject; she was also more conscious of world opinion, and (as Mazhar Ali Khan had warned) mindful of Bhutto's precarious position within Pakistan. The agreement they finally signed – shortly after noon on 3 July – spoke only of maintaining the line of control. However, on Indian insistence, a clause was added that the two countries would settle all their differences 'by peaceful means through bilateral negotiations or by any other peaceful means mutually agreed upon – this, in theory, ruling out either

third-party mediation or the stoking of violence in Kashmir.[65] However, Bhutto had apparently assured Mrs Gandhi that, once his position was more secure, he would persuade his people to accept conversion of the line of control into the international border.

The ink had hardly dried on the Simla Agreement when Bhutto reneged on this (admittedly informal) promise. On 14 July he spoke for three hours in the National Assembly of Pakistan, his text covering sixty-nine pages of closely printed foolscap paper. He talked of how he had fought 'for the concept of one Pakistan from the age of 15'. He blamed Mujib, Yahya, and everyone but himself for the 'unfortunate and tragic separation of East Pakistan'. Then he came to the topic that still divided Pakistan and India – the future of Jammu and Kashmir. As the victor in war, said Bhutto, 'India had all the cards in her hands' – yet he had still forged an equal agreement from an unequal beginning. The Simla accord was a success, he argued, because Pakistan would get back its POWs and land held by Indian forces, and because it did 'not compromise on the right of self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir'. He offered the 'solemn commitment of the people of Pakistan, that if tomorrow the people of Kashmir start a freedom movement, if tomorrow Sheikh Abdullah or Maulvi Farooq or others start a people's movement, we will be with them'.[66]

The Indians complained that Bhutto had gone back on his word.[67] They should perhaps have thought of how they had themselves felt in the last days of 1962. The Chinese had then inflicted a humiliation on the nation, affecting both leaders and citizens of all shades and stripes. That is also how the Pakistanis felt in 1972, having suffered a comparable defeat at the hands of the Indians. In truth, they felt even worse, for while the Chinese had merely seized some (mostly useless) territory from India, the Indians had, by assisting in the creation of Bangladesh, blown a big hole in the founding ideology of the Pakistani nation. To this there could be only one effective answer – to assist in the separation of Kashmir from India, thus to blow an equally big hole in the founding idea of Indian secularism.