LEFTWARD TURNS

> Never, never underestimate a politician's need to survive . . . I will not make the mistake of underestimating the political instinct of a Kashmiri, who is, additionally, Jawaharlal Nehru s daughter.
>
> Anonymous Indian columnist, May 1966

I

THE GENERAL ELECTION SCHEDULED for early 1967 would be the fourth since Independence, and the first since Jawaharlal Nehru's death. In the last weeks of 1966, an American magazine sent a reporter to assess the lie of the land. He was struck by 'the bizarre range of India's seething problems of religious fanaticism, language barriers, regional feuds'. Adding to the unrest were food shortages and inflation, and 'a continuing population explosion [which] impedes almost all progress'. These varied forms of violence had 'raised speculation that the elections [of 1967] may not be held'. The reporter thought it possible that 'the breakdown of law and order will be so complete that the Army will take power, as happened in neighbouring Pakistan and Burma'. And there was a more dismal prospect still – namely, that the 'collapse of the present regime [in India] would add a grim new element to the job the US has taken on in Vietnam – the effort to assure political stability and economic strength in Asia.'[1]

To the average Western visitor, India was – and remains – a strange, even overwhelming, place. This particular journalist was on his first – and so far as one can tell, last – visit. But as it happened, his prognosis was endorsed by another who doubtless knew India much better, having already lived there for six years at the time.

This was Neville Maxwell of the London *Times*,who in the first weeks of 1967 wrote a series of articles on 'India's Disintegrating Democracy'. As Maxwell saw it, 'famine is threatening, the administration is strained and universally believed to be corrupt, the government and the governing party have lost public confidence and belief in themselves as well'. These various crises had created an '*emotional readiness* for *the rejection of Parliamentary democracy*'. The 'politically sophisticated Indians' to whom Maxwell spoke expressed 'a deep sense of defeat, an alarmed awareness that the future is not only dark but profoundly uncertain'.

Maxwell's own view was that 'the crisis is upon India' – he could discern 'the already fraying fabric of the nation itself', with the states 'already beginning to act like sub-nations'. His conclusion was unequivocal: that while Indians would soon vote in 'the fourth – and *surely last* – general election', 'the great experiment of developing India within a democratic framework has failed'.

The imminent collapse of democracy in India, thought Maxwell, would provoke a frantic search for 'an alternative antidote for the society's troubles'. As he saw it, 'in India, as present trends continue, within the ever-closing vice of food and population, maintenance of an ordered structure of society is going to slip out of reach of an ordered structure of civil government and the army will be *the only alternative source* of authority and order. That it will be drawn into a civil role seems inevitable, the only doubt is how?'

Maxwell thought that ‘a mounting tide of public disorder, fed perhaps by pockets of famine’ , would lead to calls for a strengthening of the office of the president, who would be asked ‘to assert a stabilizing authority over the centre and the country’. Backing him would be the army, which would come to exercise ‘more and more civil authority’. In this scenario, the president would become ‘either the actual source of political authority, or a figure-head for a group composed possibly of army officers and a few politicians’. [2]

II

There are some fine ethnographic accounts of the 1967 Indian general election, field studies of different constituencies by scholars familiar with their culture and social composition. These show that elections were no longer a top-dressing on inhospitable soil; they had been fully indigenized, made part of Indian life, a festival with its own unique set of rituals, enacted every five years. The energy and intensity of this particular iteration was manifest in the large turnout at rallies and leaders speeches, and in the colourful posters and slogans used to glorify parties or debunk their opponents. The rivalries were intense, at the state as well as the national level. Opposing the ruling Congress were parties to its left, such as the various communist and socialist fragments; and parties to the right, such as Jana Sangh and Swatantra. In some states the Congress’s competition came from regional groupings – such as the Akali Dal in the Punjab and the DMK in Madras.

As these ethnographies reveal, twenty years of economic development had deepened and complicated the process of political competition. Often, rival candidates had cut their teeth running schools, colleges and co-operatives before contesting a legislative or parliamentary election. Those institutions were vehicles of prestige and patronage, their control valuable in itself and a means of mobilizing voter support.[3]

The election of 1967 is the first I have any personal memories of. What I remember best is this slogan, shouted with vigour along the streets of the small sub-Himalayan town in which I lived: ‘*Jana Sangh ko vote do, bidi peena chhod do/ Bidi mein tambaku hai, Kangresswala daku hai*’.

The Congress Party was full of thieves, and the cheroot contained that dangerous substance, tobacco: by rejecting both and embracing the Jana Sangh – the leading opposition party in town – the voter would purify himself as well as the government. Such was the slogan’s message, which apparently resonated with many citizens. So found a survey of voters in thirteen states, conducted by the country’s pioneer pollster, E. P. W. da Costa of the Indian Institute of Public Opinion. Conducted just before the polls, this survey found that the Congress had ‘lost a great deal of its charisma’; it approached the election ‘for the first time, as a political loser not as a guaranteed victor’.

The survey suggested that while the Congress would retain power in the centre, it would drop its vote share by 2–3 percentage points and lose perhaps fifty seats in the Lok Sabha. But it would lose even more heavily in the states. According to da Costa, non-Congress governments would be formed in the states of Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Rajas-than, and perhaps also in Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.

Why had support for the Congress declined? The survey found that the minorities, once a loyal vote bank, were disenchanted with the party, as were large sections of the young and the less educated. On the other side, the opposition was more united than before. In most states, non-Congress parties had made seat adjustments – which meant that, unlike in the past, the Congress could not so easily benefit from a three- or four-way division of the vote.

Table 19.1 – Performance of the Congress in Indian elections, 1952–67

	LOK SABHA		*STATE ASSEMBLIES*	
	Percentage of total		*Percentage of total*	
Year	*Votes*	*Seats*	*Votes*	*Seats*
1952	45.0	74.4	42.0	68.4
1957	47.8	75.1	45.5	65.1
1962	44.5	71.8	44.0	60.5
1967	40.7	54.5	40.0	48.5

As da Costa saw it, this fourth general election would inaugurate a 'second Non-Violent Revolution in India's recent history'. The first was begun by Mahatma Gandhi in 1919, and culminated in Independence in 1947. Since then, the Congress had held power in the centre as well as all the states, except for a very brief spell in Kerala. Now, this election would signal 'the disintegration of the monolithic exercise of power by the Congress Party'. Da Costa's conclusion is worth quoting: 'To the candidates this is, perhaps, a struggle for power; to the political scientist it is, as nearly half a century ago, the beginning of a break with the past. It is by no means yet a revolt; but it may in time be a revolution.'[4]

Poll predictions are notorious for being unreliable – in India perhaps even more than elsewhere. But when the actual results came in, da Costa must have felt vindicated. In the Lok Sabha the Congress's seat tally had dropped from 361 to 283, while its losses in the state assemblies were even greater. The party's decline is summed up in Table 19.1.

III

The most humiliating defeat suffered by the Congress was in the southern state of Madras. Here, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) swept the polls, winning 138 seats out of a total of 234 in the Assembly. The Congress won a mere 50. The DMK leader C. N. Annadurai was sworn in as chief minister.

Madras had long been a Congress stronghold; many national leaders, past and present, hailed from the state. Now, even the venerable K. Kamaraj was washed away in the landslide. He lost in his home town, Virudhunagar, to a 28-year-old student activist named P. Srinivasan. When the news reached Madras, jubilant DMK cadres found a namesake of the victor, placed him on a horse and paraded him through the city. Of the Congress president's defeat, a respected weekly wrote that 'in terms of political prestige, here and abroad, it was beyond any doubt, the worst blow ever suffered by Mr. Kamaraj's party, before or after independence'.[5]

The Congress had a fairly good record in the state; its administration was known to be clean and efficient. Some commentators thought that the DMK rode to victory on the back of the anti-Hindi agitation of 1965. However, that movement itself was made possible by patient organizational work over the past decade. The DMK had fanned out into the towns and villages, creating local clubs and

party branches. Crucial here were its links with the hugely popular Tamil film industry. One of its main leaders, M. Karunanidhi, was a successful scriptwriter. More important, it had the support – moral as well as material – of the great popular film hero M. G. Ramachandran (MGR).

Originally from Kerala, but born to a family of plantation labourers in Sri Lanka, MGR had a fanatical following in the Tamil countryside. In his films he vanquished the forces of evil, these variously represented by policemen, landlords, foreigners and the state. The movies he starred in played to packed houses, with viewers seeing them over and over again. Many of his most devoted fans were women.

All across Madras, MGR *manrams* (fan clubs) had been established. These discussed his films and also his politics. For MGR was a longtime supporter of the DMK. He gave money to the party, and was always at hand to speak at its rallies and conferences.

A month before the 1967 elections, MGR was shot and wounded by a rival film star named M. R. Radha (the two, apparently, had fallen out over what men in general, and Indian film stars in particular, usually fall out over). Photographs of the wounded hero were abundantly used in the election campaign. MGR himself decided to stand – he won his seat in a canter, and his party did the same.[6]

In power, the DMK practised what one scholar has called an 'assertive and paternalist populism'. Where the Congress brought large industrial projects to the state, the DMK focused on schemes that might win it immediate support. Thus it increased the percentage of government jobs reserved for the lower castes who were its own chief source of support. Greater control was exercised over the trade in cereals, and food subsidies granted to the urban poor. Meanwhile, to foster regional pride, the government organized an international conference on Tamil culture and language, in which scholars from twenty countries participated, and where the chief minister expressed the hope that Tamil would become the link language for the whole of India.[7]

IV

The Congress also lost in Kerala, to an alliance of the left. In 1963 the Communist Party of India (CPI) had split into two fractions, the newer one called the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM. It was the CPM which had the more dynamic leaders, including E. M. S. Namboo-diripad. Now the CPM won 52 out of the 133 seats in the Kerala State Assembly; the Congress 30, and the CPI 19. The communists came together to form the government, with EMS being sworn in for his second term as chief minister.

The Congress had previous experience of losing in Kerala but, to its distress, it also lost power in West Bengal, where the party had held undisputed sway since 1947. The winners in that state were the United Front–Left Front alliance, its main members the Bangla Congress (as its name suggests, a breakaway from the mother party), and the CPM. In the assembly elections the Congress won 127 seats out of a House of 280. On the other side, the CPM had 43 and the Bangla Congress 34; joined by an assortment of left-wing groups and independents, they could just about muster a majority.

The Bangla Congress leader Ajoy Mukherjee became chief minister. The deputy chief minister was Jyoti Basu, an urbane, London-educated lawyer who had long been the civilized face of Bengali communism. Basu and some others thought that their party could shape the government's policies from within. Other CPM members, notably its chief organizer Promode Dasgupta, thought that the party should never have joined the government at all.[8]

Whole books have been written on doctrinal disputes within the Indian communist movement. Here, we need know only that the Communist Party of India split in 1963 on account of two differences: one external to the country, the other internal to it. The two issues were connected. The parent party, the CPI, was closely tied to the apron strings of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; one consequence of this was that it had forsworn armed revolution, if only because the Soviets wanted good relations with the government of India. The breakaway CPM believed in fraternal relations with both the Russian and Chinese communist parties. It saw the Indian state as run by a bourgeois–landlord alliance and parliamentary democracy as mostly a sham; to be used when it suited one's purposes, and to be discarded when it didn't.[9]

The decision of the CPM to join the government was preceded by a bitter debate, with Jyoti Basu speaking in favour and Promode Dasgupta against. Ultimately the party joined, only to create a great sense of expectation among the cadres. An early gesture was to rename Harrington Road after a hero of the world communist movement, so that at the height of the Vietnam War the address of the United States Consulate was 7 Ho Chi Minh Sarani, Calcutta.

That was easy enough; but henceforth the decisions became harder. In the spring of 1967 a land dispute broke out in Naxalbari, in the Darjeeling district, where India's borders touched Nepal on the west and Pakistan on the east, with Tibet and the semi-independent kingdoms of Bhutan and Sikkim not far away. The economy in these Himalayan foothills was dominated by tea plantations, many run by British-owned companies. There was a history of land scarcity, and of conflicts over land – with plantation workers seeking plots of their own, and indigenous sharecroppers seeking relief from usurious landlords.

In the Naxalbari area, the rural poor were mobilized by a *krishak samiti* (peasants' organization) owing allegiance to the CPM. Its leader was a middle-class radical named Kanu Sanyal, whose rejectionof his social milieu in favour of work in the villages had won him a considerable following. From late March 1967 the *samiti* organized a series of demonstrations against landlords who had evicted tenants and/or hoarded grain. These protests became more militant, leading to skirmishes with the police, which turned violent. A constable was killed; in retaliation, the police fired on a crowd. The peasant leaders decided to take to arms, and soon landlords were being beheaded.

The protests had their roots in the deeply inequitable agrarian structure of northern Bengal. But they may not have taken the form they did had the CPM not joined the government. Some activists, and perhaps many peasants, felt that now that their party was in power, they were at liberty to set right the feudal structure on their own. To their surprise, the party reacted by taking the side of the forces of law and order. By the late summer of 1967 an estimated 1,500 policemen were on duty in Naxalbari. Kanu Sanyal and his fellow leaders were in jail, while other rebels had taken refuge in the jungle.[10]

Naxalbari quickly came to enjoy an iconic status among Indian revolutionaries. The village gave its name to the region and, in time, to anyone anywhere who would use arms to fight the Indian state on behalf of the oppressed and disinherited. 'Naxalite' became shorthand for 'revolutionary', a term evoking romance and enchantment at one end of the political spectrum and distaste and derision at the other.[11]

Among those who approved of the Naxalites were the leaders of communist China. In the last week of June 1967 Radio Peking announced that

> A phase of peasants' armed struggle led by the revolutionaries of the Indian Communist Party has been set up in the countryside in Darjeeling District of West Bengal State in India. This is

> the front paw of the revolutionary armed struggle launched by the Indian people under the guidance of Mao Tse-tung's teachings. This represents the general orientation of the Indian revolution at the present time. The people of India, China and the rest of the world hail the emergence of this revolutionary armed struggle.[12]

While the first sparks of revolution were being lit in Naxalbari, another group of Maoists were preparing for action in Andhra Pradesh. The Andhra 'Naxalites' were active in two regions: Telengana, where there had been a major communist insurgency in 1946-9, and the Srikakulam district, bordering Orissa. In both regions the areas of dispute were land and forests. In both the main agents of exploitation were the state and landlords, the main victims peasants and (especially) tribals. And in both, communist mobilization focused on free access to forest produce, better wages for labourers and the redistribution of land.

In Srikakulam the struggle was led by a school teacher named Vempatapu Satyanarayana. He led the tribals in a series of labour strikes, and in seizing grain from the fields of rich farmers and redistributing it to the needy. By the end of 1967 the landlords had sought the help of the police, who came in and arrested hundreds of protesters. Satyanarayana and his men now decided to take to arms. The houses of landlords and moneylenders were raided and their records and papers burnt. The state's response was to send in more police; by early 1969 there were as many as nine platoons of Special Armed Police operating in the district.

The struggle in Telengana was led by Tarimala Nagi Reddy. He was a veteran of the communist movement who had spent years organizing peasants and also served several terms in the state legislature. Now, he proclaimed the futility of the parliamentary path; resigning from the assembly as well as from the CPM, he took once more to the villages. He linked up with grass-roots workers in mobilizing peasants to ask for higher wages and for an end to corruption among state officials. Young militants were trained in the use of arms. The district was divided into zones; to each were assigned several *dalams* or groups of dedicated revolutionaries.[13]

Back in West Bengal, the coalition government had fallen apart in less than a year. President's Rule was imposed before fresh elections in early 1969 saw the CPM substantially increase its tally. It won 80 seats; making it by far the biggest partner in a fresh alliance with the Bangla Congress and others. Ajoy Mukherjee once more became chief minister, the CPM preferring to keep the key Home portfolio and generally play Big Brother.

These were years of great turmoil in the state, as captured in the titles of books written about the period such as *The Agony of West Bengal* and *The Disinherited* State.One axis of conflict was between the centre and the state. The government of India wasworried about the law-and-order situation, the ruling Congress peeved about its own loss of power in West Bengal. The governor became a key player, communicating the concernsof the centre (and, less justifiably, of the Congress) to the local politicians. The assembly was disrupted regularly; on one occasion, the governor was physically prevented from delivering his customary opening address, having to flee the premises under police escort.[14]

A second axis of conflict was between the two main parties in the state government. Where Ajoy Mukherjee and his Bangla Congress tried weakly to keep the machinery of state in place, the CPM was not above stoking street protest and even violence to further its aims. In factories in and around Calcutta, workers took to the practice of *gherao* – the mobbing of their managers to demand better wages and working conditions. Previously the management had been able to call in the police; the new government, however, insisted that any such stoppage of work had to be referred first to the

labour minister (a CPM man). This was an invitation to strike: according to one estimate, there were more than 1,200 *gheraos* in the first six months of the first UF–LF government.[15]

These stoppages created a ripple in the British press, in part because many of the great Calcutta firms were British owned, in part because this had once been the capital of the Raj. 'West Bengal expects more lawlessness' ran one headline; 'Riot stops opening of West Bengal Assembly', ran another. The response of many factory owners, Indian as well as European, was to shut down their units. Others shifted their business elsewhere, in a process of capital flight that served to displace Calcutta as the leading centre of Indian industry.[16]

Apart from capitalists worried about their profits, the prevailing lawlessness also disturbed the chief minister of West Bengal. He saw it as the handiwork of the CPM, whose ministerial portfolios included Land and Labour – where the trouble raged – and Home – where it could be controlled but wasn't. So in protest against the protests that old Gandhian Ajoy Mukherjee decided to organize a *satyagraha* of his own. He toured the districts, delivering speeches that railed against the CPM for promoting social discord. Then, on 1 December, he began a seventy-two-hour fast in a very public place – the Curzon Park in south Calcutta. In the rich history of Indian *satyagrahas*, this must surely be counted as the most bizarre: a chief minister fasting against his own government's failure to keep the peace.[17]

A third axis of conflict was between the CPM and the Naxalites. The latter had now formed a new party, called the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). In district after district, cadres left the parent party to join the new kid on the block; just as, back in 1963–4, they had left the CPI to join the CPM. The rivalries between the two parties were intense; and very often violent. The leader of the CPI(ML), Charu Mazumdar, urged the elimination of landlords, who were 'class enemies , as well as of CPM cadres, who were 'right deviationists'. On its part, the CPM raised a private army (euphemistically termed a 'volunteer force') to further their version of the 'people's democratic revolution'.[18]

As in British times, it is the reports of the Intelligence Bureau that best capture the contours of political unrest. One IB report listed 137 'major cases of lawlessness in West Bengal'; this over a mere six-week period between 19 March and 4 May 1970. These were classified under different headings. Several pitted two parties against each other: 'CPM vs CPI', 'CPM vs Congress', 'CPM vs CPML'. Sometimes the ire was directed against the state:'CPM vs Police Party , for example, or 'Extremists vs Constables' , this a reference to an attack on a police station in Malda district in which Naxalites speared a constable to death and looted the armoury. Then there was a case listed as 'Extremist Students vs Vice Chancellor', which dealt with an incident in Calcutta's Jadavpur University, where radical students kept the vice-chancellor captive for several hours before damaging the furniture and scribbling Maoist slogans on the walls of hisoffice.[19]

In the villages, Naxalites had hoped to catalyse unrest by beheading landlords; in the city, they thought that the same could be achieved by random attacks on policemen.Kipling had once called Calcutta the 'City of Dreadful Night'; now the citizens lived in dread by day as well. The shops began closing in the early afternoon; by dusk the streets were deserted.[20] 'Not a day passes in this turbulent and tortured city', wrote one reporter, 'without a few bombs being hurled at police pickets and patrols'. The police, for their part, raided houses and college hostels in search of the extremists. In one raid they seized explosives sufficient to make 3,000 bombs.[21]

V

Tamil pride was resurgent in the south; class warfare on the rise in the east. But the Congress consensus was crumbling elsewhere as well. In the state of Orissa the Congress had been routed by a partnership between Swatantra and the party of the local landed elite. Their election campaign had targeted two leading Congress figures, Biju Patnaik and Biren Mitra, for their alleged corruption and opulent lifestyles. It was alleged that, while in power in the state, Patnaik and Mitra hadtaken bribes from businessmen and allotted lucrative government contracts to their friends and relatives.[22] A popular slogan, a local variant, so to say, of the one shouted in distant Dehradun, was '*Biju Biren kauthi/ mada botal jauthi*' (Where there are liquor bottles, there you will find Biju and Biren). On coming to power, the Swatantra–Jana–Congress alliance immediately constituted a commission of inquiry to look into the corruption of the previous government.[23]

Challenged by parties of left and right, the Congress also found itself bleeding from inside. In most states in northern India it had won slender majorities. These became prey to intrigue, with the formation of factions by ambitious leaders seeking to become chief minister. In the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Bihar, Congress governments were formed, only to fall when a group of disgruntled defectors moved across to the other side. In a political lexicon already rich in acronyms a new one entered: 'SVD', Samyukta Vidhayak Dal, or the United Legislators Party – as the name suggests, a Rag, Tag and Bobtail outfit, a coalition of legislators left, right and centre, united only by the desire to grab power.

These SVD governments were made up of the Jana Sangh, socialists, Swatantra, local parties and Congress defectors – this last often the key element that made a numerical majority possible. At one level the SVD phenomena signalled the rise of the lower castes, who had benefited from land legislation but been denied the fruits of political power. In the north, these castes included the Jats in Haryana and UP, the Kurmis and Koeris in Bihar, the Lodhs in MP and the Yadavs in all these states. In the south, they included the Marathas in Maharashtra, the Vokkaligas in Mysore, the Vellalas in Madras and the Reddys and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh. These castes occupied an intermediate position in the social hierarchy, below the Brahmins but above the Untouchables. In many areas they were the 'dominant caste', numerically significant and well organized. What they lacked was access to state power. The DMK was chiefly fuelled by such castes, as were the socialists who had increased their vote share in the north. Notably, many of the Congress defectors also came from this strata.

At another level, the SVD governments were simply the product of personal ambition. Consider the state of Madhya Pradesh. Here, the Congress's troubles started before the election, when the Rajmata (queen mother) of Gwalior left the party because she had not been consulted in the choice of candidates. With her son Madhavrao she campaigned energetically against the Congress. An intelligence report claimed the Rajmata spent Rs3 million during the election. Although the Congress came back to power, in the Gwalior region the party was wiped out. Now, claimed the report, the Rajmata was planning to spend more money 'to subvert the loyalties of some Congress legislators . . . [and] bring about the downfall of the new Congress Ministry'.[24]

The chief minister, a canny operator named D. P. Mishra, was quite prepared for this. He was wooing defectors from other parties himself – as he wrote to the Congress president, he had 'to open the door for all who wish to join the Party'.[25] Eventually, though, the Rajmata was successful, when the prominent Congress defector Govind Narain Singh got twenty-eight others to leave the party with him. Before the crucial vote in the House, Singh kept his flock sequestered in his home, watching over them with a rifle in case they be kidnapped or otherwise seduced.

Not sure how long their tenure would last, the SVD government had to make every day count. Or

every order, rather. Ministers specified a fee for sanctioning or stopping transfers of officials. Thus 'orders, particularly transfer orders, were issued and cancelled with bewildering rapidity'. Characteristically, the Jana Sangh wanted the Education portfolio, so that 'they could build up a permanent following through the primary schools'. They eventually got Home, where they maintained the communal peace by keeping their followers in check, yet took great care 'to see that no key post in any department went to a Muslim'.[26]

Despite the defections and the corruptions they engendered, what transpired after the 1967 elections was indeed what E. P. W. da Costa had called it – India's second non-violent revolution. One could now take a train from New Delhi to Calcutta, a journey of 1,000 miles right through the country's heartland, and not pass through a single Congress-ruled state.

VI

The late 1960s saw a fresh assertion of regionalist sentiment. Parts of the old Hyderabad state, merged with Andhra Pradesh in 1956, now wanted out. The movement was led by students of the Osmania University, who complained that Andhra was run for the benefit of the coastal elite. The new state they demanded would centre on the neglected inland districts. To be named Telengana, it would have Hyderabad as its capital. Strikes and processions were held, trains stopped and claims advanced of 'colonization by Andhras' and 'police *zulm*' (terror).[27]

Across the country a new state had in fact been created, out of the tribal districts of Assam. The movement here had a long history. An Eastern Indian Tribal Union was formed in 1955 to represent the inhabitants of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills. Five years later it was renamed the All-Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC). In the 1967 elections the Congress was routed in the hills by the APHLC. This, along with the fear of stoking an insurgency on the Naga and Mizo pattern, prompted the centre to create a new province in December 1969. The state was called Meghalaya, meaning abode of the clouds.[28]

In Punjab, meanwhile, an existing state was in search of a capital of its own. After the state's division in 1966, Chandigarh served as the capital of both Punjab and Haryana. The Sikhs believed, with reason, that the city should be reserved to them – indeed, the centre had indicated that it would. Now the Punjabis were urging the government to make good their promise. Through 1968 and 1969 there were popular demonstrations to this effect. In October 1969 the veteran freedom fighter Darshan Singh Pherumal died after a fast aimed at making New Delhi hand over Chandigarh. The prime minister issued an anodyne note of sympathy: she hoped that Pherumal's death would 'move the people of Punjab and of Haryana towards bringing their hearts and minds together in an act of great reconciliation'.[29]

Just as the Sikhs wanted Chandigarh exclusively for themselves, so, with regard to Bombay, did some Maharashtrians. The city had a new political party, named the Shiv Sena after the great medieval Maratha warrior Shivaji. In some ways this was a continuation of the old Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti – albeit in a more extreme form. Instead of 'Bombay for Maharashtra the call now was 'Bombay for Maharashtrians'. The Shiv Sena was the handiwork of a cartoonist named Bal Thackeray, whose main target was south Indians, whom he claimed were taking away jobs from the natives. Thackeray lampooned *dhoti*-clad 'Madrasis' in his writings and drawings; while his followers attacked Udupi restaurants and homes of Tamil and Telugu speakers. Another target were the communists, whose control of the city's textile unions the Shiv Sena sought to undermine by

making deals with the management.

Bombay was India's *urbs prima*; its financial and industrial capital, and the centre of its entertainment industry. In this most cosmopolitan of cities, a nativist agenda proved surprisingly successful, being especially attractive to the educated unemployed. In 1968 the Sena won as many as 42 seats in the Bombay municipal elections, standing second only to the Congress.[30]

These calls for greater autonomy in the heartland were accompanied by stirrings in the periphery among groups and leaders who had never been entirely reconciled to being part of India in the first place. In March 1968 Sheikh Abdullah was freed from house arrest in Kodaikanal and allowed to return to his Valley. This was a year after the 1967 elections which, in Kashmir at any rate, had not really been free and fair: in twenty-two out of seventy-five constituencies the Congress candidate was returned unopposed when his rivals' nomination papers were rejected.[31] Her own advisers now prevailed upon Mrs Gandhi to free Abdullah. Their information was that the Sheikh was 'gradually adapting himself' to the fact that the accession of Kashmir to India was irrevocable.[32]

As in 1964, the Lion of Kashmir returned home to a hero's welcome, driving in an open jeep into the Valley, accepting garlands from the estimated half-million admirers who had lined the roads to greet him. As ever, his statements were amenable to multiple meanings, with him saying at one place that he would discuss 'all possibilities' with the Indian government, at another that he would never compromise on the Kashmiri 'right to self-determination'. To a British newspaper he offered a three-way resolution: Jammu to go to India, 'Azad' Kashmir to Pakistan, with the Valley – the real bone of contention – to be put under UN trusteeship for five years, after which it would vote on whether to join India or Pakistan, or be independent. Ambivalent on politics, the Sheikh was, just as characteristically, direct in his defence of secularism. When a dispute between students threatened to escalate into a Hindu-Muslim riot, Abdullah pacified the disputants, then walked the streets of Srinagar urging everyone to calm down. He made his associates take a pledge that they were 'prepared to shed their blood to protect the life, honour and property of the minorities in Kashmir'.[33]

Meanwhile, the rebels in Nagaland were seeking a fresh resolution of their own. With Phizo in London, the movement was passing into the hands of younger radicals, such as Isaac Swu and T. Muivah. Where the older man had opposed seeking help from communist China – owing to its hostility to the Christian faith – these men had no such inhibitions. Reports came that 1,000 Nagas had crossed into Yunnan via Burma, there to receive Chinese machine guns, mortars and rocket launchers, as well as instruction on how to use them. Back in Nagaland, there were violent clashes between the Indian army and the rebels.[34]

Endorsing the move towards Peking was that longtime supporter of the Naga cause, David Astor of the Observer. Astor predicted that Nagaland would follow the course set by Ireland – where a colonial government had reluctantly to grant independence to the southern part of the island. Since the Nagas were as stubborn as the Irish, the magnate thought that they 'can now use the leverage of Chinese support . . . to survive successfully'. Astor hoped that 'friendly British voices would point out to Delhi the relevance of the lesson we had to learn when similarly challenged by the Irish'.[35] The advice rested on a serious, not to say tragic, underestimation of the powers of the Indian state.

VII

Disturbingly, the late 1960s also witnessed arise in violence between Hindus and Muslims. According to figures released by the National Integration Council, there were 132 incidences of

communal violence in 1966, 220 in 1967 and as many as 346 in 1968 (the upward trend continued during 1969 and 1970). These conflicts often had their origins in petty disputes, such as the playing of music before a mosque or the killing of a cow near a temple. Sometimes attacks on women or fights over property sparked the trouble. In terms of number of incidents, the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were the worst hit.[36]

One reason for this sudden upsurge in violence was the weakness of state governments. Particularly culpable were the SVD regimes, who vacillated in using force to quell riots or rioters. Another reason was that, in the aftermath of the war of 1965, feelings against Pakistan ran high. These could easily be turned against Indian Muslims, seen (unfairly) as fifth columnists working on behalf of the enemy. 'Jana Sangh-inspired Hindus' were particularly prone to taunting Muslims in this fashion. Now, when a dispute broke out, to the old, religiously inspired slogans – '*Har Har Mahadev*' and '*Allah O* Akbar' – was added a new one on the Hindu side: '*Pakistan ya Kabristan*' (Go to Pakistan, or else we will send you to your grave).[37]

One of the worst riots took place in Ahmedabad, the Gujarati city that Mahatma Gandhi had once called home. Ironically, it took place on the eve of the centenary of Gandhi's birth, and was thus a deep source of embarrassment to the government, which had planned a lavish celebration, with dignitaries coming in from all over the world. On 12 September 1969 a procession commemorating a Muslim saint ran into a group of *sadhus* walking back to their temple with cows. Hot words were exchanged, whereupon Muslim youths entered the temple and smashed a few idols. A Muslim delegation, led by a respected lawyer, went immediately to apologize, but the priests were not to be pacified. As word spread of the desecration, crowds of Hindus began collecting, looking for targets to attack. Qurans were burnt in one place, Muslim shops attacked in another. With the Muslims fighting back, the trouble spread through the city and, in time, to towns near Ahmedabad as well. As the police looked mutely on, gangs battled each other in the narrow streets of the old town. After a week of fighting, the army was called in to restore the peace. More than 1,000 people had lost their lives. Thirty times that number had been rendered homeless. A majority in both cases were Muslim.[38]

There was a very serious riot in Ranchi, in Bihar, in the summer of 1967; a very bad one in Jalgaon, in Maharashtra, three years later. In between, numerous other towns in north and west India had witnessed intercommunal violence. The writer Khush want Singh bitterly noted that the Indian adolescent was now learning the geography of his country through the history of murder. Aligarh and Ranchi and Ahmedabad were no longer centres of learning or culture or industry, but places where Indians butchered one another in the name of religion. As Singh pointed out, in these riots 'nine out of ten killed are Muslims. Nine out of ten homes and business establishments destroyed are Muslim homes or enterprises.' Besides, the majority of those rendered homeless, and of those apprehended by the police, were also Muslim. 'Is it any great wonder', asked the writer, 'that an Indian Muslim no longer feels secure in secular India? He feels discriminated against. He feels a second-class citizen.'[39]

In 1967–8, when the communal temperature began to rise, India had a Muslim president (Dr Zakir Hussain) as well as a Muslim chief justice of the Supreme Court (M. Hidayatullah). However, as a Delhi journal pointed out, this was by no means representative of 'the position of Muslims in the totality of Indian life'. They were seriously under-represented in professions such as engineering and medicine, and in industry, trade and the armed forces. This was in part because of the flight of the Muslim upper crust to Pakistan, yet subtle social prejudice also contributed. The Muslims had long stood solidly behind the Congress, but in the elections of 1967 they voted in large numbers for other parties as a way of showing their disillusionment. The Muslim predicament was a product of bigotry

and communal politics on the Hindu side, and of an obscurantist leadership on their own.[40]

VII

To the historian, the late 1960s are reminiscent of the late 1940s, likewise a time of crisis and conflict, of resentment along lines of class, religion, ethnicity and region, of a centre that seemed barely to hold. I wonder if these parallels occurred to the Indians who lived through these times, to people in authority in particular, and to the prime minister most of all.

The resonances were not merely national or sociological, but also familial. With the Raj in its death throes, Jawaharlal Nehru became prime minister of an interim government in 1946; the next year, the post became more substantial when India became independent. Indira Gandhi was unexpectedly thrust into office in 1966; the next year, the job was confirmed formally when she led her party to an election victory. Like Nehru, she was in control in Delhi; like him, she could not be certain how far her government's writ ran beyond it. He and she had both to contend with communist insurrection and communal conflict; he was additionally faced with the problem of the princely states, she with the problem of a dozen anti-Congress state governments.

Here the parallels end. Seeking to unite a divided India, Nehru articulated an ideology that rested on four main pillars. First, there was democracy, the freedom to choose one's friends and speak one's mind (and in the language of one's choice) – above all, the freedom to choose one's leaders through regular elections based on universal adult franchise. Second, there was secularism, the neutrality of the state in matters of religion and its commitment to maintaining social peace. Third, there was socialism, the attempt to augment productivity while ensuring a more egalitarian distribution of income (and of social opportunity). Fourth, there was non-alignment, the placement of India beyond and above the rivalries of the Great Powers. Among the less compelling, but not necessarily less significant, elements of this worldview were the conscious cultivation of a multi party system (notably through debate in Parliament), and a respect for the autonomy of the judiciary and the executive.

Although rearticulated in the context of a newly independent India, these beliefs had been developing over a period of more than twenty years. Nehru was a well-read and widely travelled man. Through his travels and readings, he arrived at a synthesis of socialism and liberalism that he thought appropriate to his country. In other words, the political beliefs he came to profess – and invited the people of India to share – were his own.

With Mrs Gandhi one cannot be so sure. She had neither read nor travelled extensively. She was unquestionably a patriot; growing up in the freedom movement, and with its leaders, she was deeply committed to upholding India's interests in the world. How she thought these could best be upheld was less certain. In all the years she had been in politics her core beliefs had not been revealed to either party or public. They knew not what she really thought of the market economy, or the Cold War, or the relations between religions, or the institutions and processes of democracy. The many volumes of Nehru's *Selected Works* are suffused with his writings on these subjects – subjects on which Mrs Gandhi, before 1967, spoke scarcely a word.

The prime minister was, so to say, *non*-ideological – an attribute not shared by her advisers. The chief among these was her principal secretary, P. N. Haksar. Educated at the London School of Economics, he was called to the Bar in the UK before returning to practise law in Allahabad. At Independence he joined the Foreign Service and served as India's ambassador to Austria and its first

high commissioner to Nigeria. In 1967 he was deputy high commissioner in London, when Mrs Gandhi asked him to join her Secretariat. Haksar and she shared a home town, a common ancestry – both were Kashmiri Pandits – and many common friends.

Haksar was a kind of polymath: a student of mathematics, he was also keenly interested in history, particularly diplomatic and military history. Among his other interests were anthropology – he had attended Bronislaw Malinowski's seminar at the LSE – and food (he was a superb cook). Haksar tended to overpower friends and colleagues with the range of his knowledge and the vigour of his opinions. However, in this case intellectual force was not necessarily matched by intellectual subtlety. His political views were those of the left wing of the British Labour Party, circa 1945 – pro-state and anti-market in economic affairs, pro-Soviet and anti-American in foreign policy. He was also – it must be added – a man of an unshakeable integrity.[41]

This book owes a great deal to P. N. Haksar, whose papers, all 500 files of them, provide a privileged window into the history of the times. But the prime minister of the day owed him even more. For, as Katherine Frank writes, 'Indira trusted Haksar's intelligence and judgement implicitly and completely. From 1967 to 1973, he was probably the most influential and powerful person in the government.'[42] Haksar shared his influence and power with the career diplomat T. N. Kaul, the politician turned diplomat D. P. Dhar, the economist turned mandarin P. N. Dhar and the policeman turned security analyst R. N. Kao. Collectively they were known (behind their backs) as the 'Panch Pan-dava', after the five heroic brothers of the Mahabharata. Coincidentally, all were Kashmiri Brahmins. There was also an outer core of advisers, these likewise officials or intellectuals rather than politicians *per se*.

This was not accidental. Even more so than Lal Bahadur Shastri, Mrs Gandhi needed to assert her independence of the Congress 'Syndicate' which had chosen her. Socially, she shared little with the party bosses –her own friends came from a more rarefied milieu. She could not be certain when they might try to unseat her. Thus she came to rely on the advice of the mandarins around her, who had no political ambitions themselves. But they did have political views to which, in time and for her own reasons, she came to subscribe.

IX

After the elections of 1967, Morarji Desai once more made manifest his desire to become prime minister. A compromise was worked out under which he would serve as finance minister and deputy prime minister – the latter a post that no one had held since the death of Vallabhbhai Patel.

Hemmed in by the Syndicate, and threatened by Desai, the prime minister now sought to mark out her own identity by presenting herself as a socialist. This was done on the advice of P. N. Haksar. In a note he prepared for her in January 1968, the mandarin advised his mistress to clip Desai's wings, perhaps by appointing one or two other 'deputy' prime ministers in addition. While choosing ministers loyal to her, the prime minister had also to forge 'wider progressive alliances under [her] more effective personal lead'. For this, she needed to 'project more assertively [her] own ideological image directly to the people over the heads of [her] colleagues and party men'.[43]

Mrs Gandhi had rarely invoked the word 'socialist' before 1967, although it was one of the four pillars of her father's political philosophy. Notably, it was the pillar that was propped up most enthusiastically by her mandarins. In part, the appeal was negative, stemming from a Brahmanical distaste for business and businessmen. But there was also a positive identification with the idea of

socialism. A greater role for the state in the economy, they believed, was necessary to ensure social equity as well as promote national integration. The public sector, wrote one mandarin, was 'a macrocosm of a united India'. In the private sector, Punjabis employed Punjabis, Marwaris trusted only Marwaris, but in the Indian Railways and the great steel factories Tamils worked alongside Biharis, Hindus with Muslims, Brahmins with Harijans. Whether or not socialism was economically feasible, it was a 'social necessity'. For, 'socialism and a large public sector . . . are effective weapons for forging a united and integrated India'.[44]

There was a strong moral core to the socialism of P. N. Haksar and his colleagues. For the prime minister, however, the appeal was pragmatic, a means of distinguishing herself from the Congress old guard. In May 1967 she presented a ten-point programme of reform to the party, which included the 'social control' of banking, the abolition of the privy purses of princes and guaranteed minimum wages for rural and industrial labour. The Syndicate was unenthusiastic, but the programme appealed to the younger generation, who saw the party's recent reverses as a consequence of the promises unfulfilled over the years.[45]

Speeches made by Mrs Gandhi after her re-election show her identifying explicitly with the poor and vulnerable. Speaking to the Lok Sabha in February 1968, she stressed the problems of landless labour, expressed her 'concern for all the minorities of India' and defended the public sector from criticisms that it was not making profit (her answer that it did not need to, since it was building a base for economic development). Speaking to the Rajya Sabha in August, she asked for a 'new deal for the down-trodden', in particular, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, pledging her 'unceasing attention and effort to this cause'. A few days later, in her Independence Day address from the ramparts of the Red Fort, she singled out 'industrialists and businessmen' who had the nerve to talk of worker indiscipline while continuing to 'make big profits and draw fat salaries'.[46]

These views resonated with the so-called 'Young Turks' in the Congress, who had started a socialist ginger group within the party. This used the pulpit of Parliament to ask embarrassing questions of the more conservative ministers. The Young Turk Chandra Shekhar raised charges of corruption against Morarji Desai's son Kanti. He also insinuated that the finance minister had issued licenses out of turn to a large industrial house. It was believed that he was speaking as a proxy for the prime minister – at any rate, she refused to censure him.[47]

Throughout 1968 and 1969, writes one biographer, Mrs Gandhi was a 'frustrated leader. She was not strong enough to defy the [Congress] organization and not rash enough to quit.'[48] Her chance came in the summer of 1969, when Dr Zakir Hussain died half-way through his term as president of the republic. The Syndicate wished to replace him with one of their own: N. Sanjiva Reddy, a former Lok Sabha Speaker and chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. Mrs Gandhi, however, preferred the vice-president, V. V. Giri, a labour leader with whom her own relations were very good.

In the first week of 1969 the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) met in Bangalore. Before she left for this meeting, the prime minister was apparently told by P. N. Haksar that 'the best way to vanquish the Syndicate would be to convert the struggle for personal power into an ideological one'.[49] In Bangalore, Mrs Gandhi openly showed her hand on the side of the Young Turks by proposing the immediate nationalization of the major banks. She also opposed Sanjiva Reddy's candidature for president, but was overruled by a majority in the Working Committee.

On returning to Delhi Mrs Gandhi divested Morarji Desai of the Finance portfolio. He was a known opponent of bank nationalization, once telling Parliament that it would 'severely strain the administrative resources of the government while leaving the basic issues untouched'. The state takeover of banks, believed Desai, would reduce the resources available for economic development,

and increase bureaucracy and red tape.[50]

After relieving Desai of the Finance Ministry, Mrs Gandhi issued an ordinance announcing that the state had taken over fourteen privately owned banks. Explaining the action over All-India Radio, she said that India was 'an ancient country but a young democracy, which has to remain ever vigilant to prevent the domination of the few over the social, economic or political systems'. This mandated that 'major banks should be not only socially controlled but publicly owned', so that they could give credit not just to big business but to 'millions of farmers, artisans, and other self-employed persons'.[51]

In a statement to the press, the prime minister claimed that there was 'a great feeling in the country' regarding the nationalization: 95 per cent of the people supported it, with only big newspapers representing commercial interests opposing it. However, a small weekly, independently owned, suggested that this might be an individual quest masquerading as an ideological battle. Mrs Gandhi had 'chosen to adopt a radical stance suddenly as a tactic in the personal strife for dominance within the Congress party', said *Thought*; she now wished to 'project herself as a national figure who needs the Congress less than it needs her'.[52]

The nationalization of banks was challenged in the Supreme Court; the challenge was upheld, but the judgement was immediately nullified by a fresh ordinance brought in by government, signed this time by the president. In the first six months of state control there was a massive expansion in the banking sector – with as many as 1,100 new branches opened, a large proportion of them in remote rural areas that had never before been serviced by formal credit.[53]

X

Attention now shifted to the election of a new president, in which all members of Parliament and state assemblies would vote. The official Congress candidate was Sanjiva Reddy. V. V. Giri had decided to contest as an independent, while the opposition had put up C. D. Deshmukh, a former civil servant and Cabinet Minister. In violation of party practice and party discipline, the prime minister decided she would support V. V. Giri. This decision was not made public, but it was conveyed to her followers, who went around canvassing the younger Congress MPs to vote for Giri. The Congress president, S. Nijalingappa, now pressed the prime minister to issue a public declaration of support for Reddy. When she wouldn't, he spoke to the Jana Sangh and Swatantra leaders asking them to shift their own allegiance from Subba Rao to Reddy. This move was seized upon by Mrs Gandhi's camp, who accused Nijalingappa of hobnobbing with the enemy. They 'requisitioned' a meeting of the AICC to discuss the matter. The request was refused.

Four days before the presidential elections – due on 20 August 1969 – Mrs Gandhi finally spoke. She asked for a 'vote of conscience'. This was a call to Congress Party members to defy their organization and vote for the rival candidate. Which they did, in fairly large numbers. Many of the older party men voted for Reddy, but in the end Giri won, on the second count. Now commenced a bitter exchange of letters between the Congress president and the prime minister. Finally, on 12 November, Mrs Gandhi was expelled from the Congress for 'indiscipline'. By this time many MPs had thrown in their lot with her. In December rival Congress sessions were held, the parent body meeting in Ahmedabad and its new challenger in Bombay. The parties were becoming known as Congress (O) and Congress (R). The letters stood in one version for 'Organization' and 'Requisitionist', in another for 'Old' and 'Reform'.[54]

In expelling Mrs Gandhi from the Congress, Nijalingappa accused her of fostering a cult of personality, of promoting herself above party and nation. The history of the twentieth century, he pointed out,

> is replete with instances of the tragedy that overtakes democracy when a leader who has risen to power on the crest of a popular wave or with the support of a democratic organisation becomes a victim of political narcissism and is egged on by a coterie of unscrupulous sycophants who use corruption and terror to silence opposition and attempt to make public opinion an echo of authority. The Congress as an organisation dedicated to democracy and socialism has to combat such trends.[55]

Nijalingappa was a lifelong Congressman, a man from peasant stock who joined the freedom movement when he was very young. He built up the party in Mysore, later serving three terms as the state's chief minister.[56] About his commitment to the party and to democracy there could be no question. But 'socialism was another matter. The nationalization of banks had strengthened his rival's claim to that label, while Nijalingappa's wooing of the Jana Sangh and Swatantra had weakened his own. This contrast was assiduously developed in the speeches and letters that bore Mrs Gandhi's name, but were the handiwork of P. N. Haksar and his colleagues. Here, the prime minister was presented as standing for socialism in economics and secularism in matters of religion, as being pro-poor and for the development of the nation as a whole. The Party president, on the other hand, was said to be promoting capitalism in economics and communalism in religion.[57]

The presentation was markedly successful. Of the 705 members of the AICC, as many as 446 attended the Congress (R) session; of the 429 Congress MPs (in both Houses), 310 joined the prime minister's camp. Of these, 220 were from the Lok Sabha, leaving the Congress (R) some forty-five seats short of a majority. To makeup the numbers it turned to independents and to the Communist Party of India. The CPI was delighted to join up, seeing Mrs Gandhi's left turn as an opportunity for expanding its own influence. In August 1969, writing of the battle within the Congress, an influential journalist close to the CPI crowed that 'the Syndicate pretensions have been torn to pieces'. 'A tide has come in the affairs of the nation', he wrote, 'and there is little doubt that . . . Indira Gandhi is taking it at the flood . . . The tide is symbolised by the enthusiastic crowds from different walks of life that have been flocking to the Prime Minister's Houseevery day. This is no ordinary craving for *darshan* of a beautiful face; they represent a new assertion of the power of the *demos*.' The journalist now looked forward to the 'implementation of a radical economic agenda and [a] firm stand against communalism'.[58]

In a comparable situation, back in 1950–2, Jawaharlal Nehru had bided his time. Faced with the conservative challenge of Tandon and company, he had worked to get his way with the party rather than divide it in two. But here, as one knowledgeable observer remarked, Mrs Gandhi had 'displayed a militancy foreign to Congress tradition'. In contrast to the incremental approach of Nehru and Shastri, she 'represented something ruthless and new. She had astonished people with her flair for cold assessment, shrewd timing, and the telling theatrical gesture; above all, with her capacity for a fight to the finish, even to bringing the eighty-four-year-old party of liberation to rupture'.[59]

XI

With the banks nationalized, Mrs Gandhi now turned to the abolition of the privileges of the princes. When their states merged with the Union, the princes were given a constitutional guarantee that they could retain their titles, jewels and palaces, be paid an annual privy purse in proportion to the size of their states and be exempt from central taxes and import duties. With so many Indians so poor, it was felt that these privileges were 'out of place and out of time – these the words of P. N. Haksar, but widely endorsed within and outside his circle.[60]

As early as July 1967 the AICC passed a resolution asking for an end to titles and privy purses. The Home Ministry prepared a detailed note, recommending action via legislation rather than executive action. The home minister, Y. B. Chavan, was asked to commence negotiations with the princes, represented in these talks by the Maharaja of Dhrangadhara. It was hoped the princes would be amenable to the change; if not, a constitutional amendment would have to be brought.[61]

Chavan and Dhrangadhara had several long meetings in 1968, but no compromise could be reached. In any case, the power struggle within the Congress ruled out hasty action. There were many MPs who were either princes or under their control, and their votes were needed to see Mrs Gandhi's candidate for president through. After Giri's election the government and the princes continued to talk, each side proving as obdurate as the other. At this stage, in December 1969, the Jam Saheb of Nawanagar sent New Delhi an intriguing proposal. This criticized both parties, the princes for adopting 'a most adamantly uncompromising stand', the government for 'going back on their [constitutional] commitments and assurances'. The Jam Saheb suggested, as away out of the impasse, that the government abolish the princes privileges, but pay them twenty years' worth of privy purses: 25 per cent in cash, 25 per cent in bonds to be redeemed after twenty years, and 50 per cent to a public charitable trust headed by the ruler. This trust's aims would be the promotion of sport, the education of backward classes and, above all, the protection of 'our fast-disappearing wildlife'.[62]

The Jam Saheb thought this a scheme that 'would befit the dignity of the nation'. Mrs Gandhi passed it on to the home minister, noting that it was 'animated by a constructive purpose'. But nothing came of it. On 18 May 1970 – the last day of the summer session of Parliament – Y. B. Chavan introduced a bill calling for a constitutional amendment annulling the privileges of the princes. The bill was taken up in the next session, when Mrs Gandhi described it as an 'important step in the further democratization of our society'.

The Lok Sabha adopted the bill by the necessary two-thirds margin – 336 for, 155 against. However, in the Rajya Sabha the motion failed to be carried by a single vote. The prime minister had apparently anticipated this adverse vote in the Upper House, for soon afterwards a presidential order was issued derecognizing the princes.

Four days later, on 11 September 1970, a group of Maharajas moved the Supreme Court against the order. The case was heard by a full bench, headed by the chief justice. On 11 December the bench ruled that the order was arbitrary and against the spirit of the constitution. Some legal scholars viewed the judgement as a victory for democracy, whereas left-wing radicals saw it as consistent with the 'tendency of the Supreme Court to protect the vested interests'.

With regard to bank nationalization, too, the Court had put a spanner in the works. This fresh challenge to her authority prompted the prime minister to dissolve Parliament and call for a fresh mandate from the people. The House still had a year to run. Explaining the decision over All-India Radio, Mrs Gandhi said that while her government had sought to 'ensure a better life to the vast majority of our people and satisfy their aspiration for a just social order . . . reactionary forces have not hesitated to obstruct [this] in every possible way').[63]

XII

On one front, at least, there was very good news for Mrs Gandhi's government – the new agricultural strategy had begun paying dividends. In 1967 there was a bad drought, which particularly affected the state of Bihar, but the next year saw a bumper crop of food grains, 95 million tonnes (mt) in all. Much of this increase was accounted for by Punjab and Haryana, whose farmers had planted the new dwarf varieties of wheat developed by Indian scientists from Mexican models. However, the new varieties of rice had also done quite well, as had cotton and groundnuts.

C. Subramaniam's strategy had been to identify those districts where irrigation was available, and those farming communities most likely to take to the new seeds, and the heavy doses of fertilizers that went with them. The results were sensational. Between 1963 and 1967, before the new methods had been tried, the annual production of wheat in India was between 9and11 mt. Between 1967 and 1970 it ranged from 16 to 20 mt. The corresponding figures for rice were 30–37 mt for the earlier period and 37–42 mt for the latter.[64]

These figures masked enormous variations by region. There remained large areas where agriculture was rain-fed, and where only one crop could be grown per year. Still, there was a feeling that endemic scarcity was a thing of the past. Modern science was laying the ghost of Malthus. In August 1969 a British journalist who was an old India hand wrote that 'for the first time in all the years I have been visiting the country, there is a coherence in the economic picture, for the first time an absence of feeling that the economy rested almost wholly on the simple success or failure of the monsoon'.[65]

The food problem was solved, but India might still fall apart – on account of, as Neville Maxwell and others had claimed, simply being too diverse. In an editorial marking twenty years of India's existence as a republic, the *New York Times* called it a 'remarkable achievement', then went on to say that 'both Union and democracy are under increasing strain these days, with the future of both in doubt'.[66] However, most Indians were by now comfortable with the diversity within. They could see what bound the varied religions, races and regions: namely, a shared political history (from the national movement onwards), a pluralistic constitution and a tradition of regular elections. Nor did they think the challenges of states a threat to national unity. As one commentator wrote – in rebuttal of doomsayers such as Maxwell – 'a strong centre is not necessarily conducive to democracy . Federalism and rule by regional parties could help sustain democracy in India, in contrast to (say) Indonesia and Ghana, where the efforts of Sukarno and Nkrumah to impose a strong centre had only led to dictatorship.[67]

Among thinking Indians then, there was little fear that the events of the late sixties would presage the break-up of the country, or the replacement of elected politicians by soldiers in uniform. Army rule was out of the question, but there was yet the prospect of an armed communist movement engulfing large parts of the country. The Green Revolution could turn Red, for agricultural prosperity had also created social polarities. And the location of Naxalbari was significant: a thin strip of India wedged between East Pakistan and Nepal that was not far from China and provided the only access to the states of the north-east. This was an 'ideal operational field' for beginning a revolution, to escape into Pakistan or Nepal when one wished, to get arms from China if one wanted. So the worry grew in New Delhi that these pro-Peking Reds would 'fan out from Naxalbari to link up with their cells in Bengal, till they come right into the heart of Calcutta. Behind them will be the Chinese army menacing the Himalayan border.'[68]

On the other side, there were some who looked forward to the revolution in the making. These were the Naxalites, of course, but also their Western fellow-travellers. In the winter of 1968/9 the Marxist anthropologist Kathleen Gough – originally American but then teaching in Canada – wrote an article which saw, as 'the most hopeful way forward for India', a 'revolutionary movement that would root itself in the countryside where the bulk of the poor were located. Taking heart from the progress, here and there, of the Naxalites and their ideology, Gough said that 'parliamentarianism seems doomed to failure, and the rebel Communists' path the only hopeful alternative'.[69]

Gough was not alone in seeing revolutionary communism as India's main hope, perhaps its only hope. That same winter, a young Swedish couple animated by the spirit of '68 travelled through the Indian countryside. They covered the land from tip to toe, from the parched fields of eastern Uttar Pradesh to the rich rice paddies of the southern Cauvery delta. They saw a new critical awareness among the oppressed, manifest in 'growing antagonisms in Indian society'. Caste conflict was turning into class conflict (as Marxist theory said, and hoped, it would). Among the intellectuals, they saw a (to them welcome) scepticism about parliamentary democracy. As one left-wing student leader remarked, 'We must not let ourselves be fooled by the hocus-pocus of elections every fifth year.'

These changes, predicted the Swedish sociologists, 'will have widespread consequences for India's future'. Blood was being spilt (as Marxist theory said it must). 'The antagonisms are sometimes so violent that they are hard to imagine.' Fortunately, 'the new revolutionary movement . . . was growing in India today'. The authors were clear that 'only when these millions of poor people take their future in their own hands will India's poverty and oppression be brought to an end'. They left their readers with this hope: 'Perhaps Naxalbari does stand for the Indian revolution.'[70]