THE RIVALS

Indira is India, India is Indira.
D. K. BAROOAH, Congress president, circa 1974

I

ON 15 AUGUST 1972 India celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Independence. A special midnight sitting was held in the Lok Sabha where the prime ministerre called the struggle for freedom from the 1857 rebellion to the present, marking the major landmarks along the way. The Indian quest, said Mrs Gandhi, 'has been friendship with all, submission to none'.[1] The next morning she addressed the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort. 'India is stronger today than it was twenty-five years ago', said the prime minister. 'Our democracy has found roots, our thinking is clear, our goals are determined, our paths are planned to achieve the goals and our unity is more solid today than ever before.' 'Nations march ahead', insisted Mrs Gandhi, 'not by looking at others but with self-confidence, determination and unity.'[2]

It is noteworthy that Mrs Gandhi's speech did not touch on economics. Since Independence, the Indian economy had grown at a rate of 3–4 per cent per year. The output of the factory sector increased by some 250 per cent, the rise being more marked in heavy industry as compared to consumer goods. A new class of entrepreneurs sprung up, who located units away from the old centres of industry. The state augmented infrastructural facilities: 56 million kilowatt hours of power were generated in 1971 (as against6.6million in 1950), while the extent of surfaced roads more than doubled, and the freight carried by the railways almosttripled.[3]

These developments helped rural producers as well as urban ones. Where irrigation was available – through dams or tube wells – farmers increased their production of both cereals and crops such as cotton, chillies and vegetables. Previously isolated villages were now integrated with the outside world. New roads allowed vehicles to take out crops and bring in commodities; they also transported villagers to the city and back, exposing them to new ideas. Within the village there was a slow spread of innovations such as the bicycle, the telephone and, above all, the school.[4]

These aggregate improvements masked significant regional variations. The Green Revolution had touched less than one-tenth of the districts in rural India. Most areas of farming were still rain-fed. Thus, despite the rise in industrial growth and agricultural production, there was still widespread destitution in the countryside. The year before the prime minister's anniversary speech, two economists in Poona, V. M. Dandekar and Nilakantha Rath, published a major study entitled, simply, *Poverty in India*. Drawing on countrywide surveys, this concluded that 40 per cent of the rural population and 50 per cent of the urban population did not enjoy even a 'minimum level of living' – defined as a per capita annual expenditure of Rs324 in the villages and Rs489 in the cities. The incidence of poverty had increased over the decade. At the beginning of the 1960s 33 per cent of the rural and 49 per cent of the urban population lived below this 'poverty line'. In or around 1970, estimated Dandekar and Rath, some 223 million Indians were poor, just over 40 per cent of the total population of about 530 million.

Other economists made other estimates: some put the percentage of the really poor even higher than Dandekar and Rath, others said it was slightly lower. The economists disputed exactly how many poor people there were in India, but all agreed that there were too many – close to 200 million by even the most conservative reckoning. These studies found that the poor in rural India spent roughly 80 per cent of their income on food and another 10 per cent on fuel, leaving a mere 10 per cent for clothing and otheritems.[5]

Another very great failure was education. There had been an enormous growth in the number of colleges offering instruction in the sciences and the humanities. An even greater expansion was in professional courses, such as engineering and medicine. But basic education had done poorly. There were more illiterates in 1972 than there had been in 1947. While thousands of new schools opened, there had been scarcely any attempt to bring literacy to the millions of adults who could not read or write. And even among those who entered school only a small proportion graduated; the drop-out rates were alarmingly high, especially for girls and children in low-caste families.[6]

A few months after Mrs Gandhi's Red Fort address the economist Jagdish Bhagwati spoke to a rather more select audience in the southern city of Hyderabad. Independent India presented itself as a mixed economy, partaking of both socialism and capitalism. But, argued Bhagwati, it had failed on both counts. It had grown too slowly to qualify as a 'capitalist' economy, and by its failure to eradicate illiteracy or reduce inequalities had forfeited any claims to being 'socialist'.[7]

II

The prime minister claimed that democracy had struck 'roots' in India. In some crucial ways it certainly had. Five general elections had been successfully conducted, plus close to a hundred elections in states the size of European countries. In addition to free elections there was also the unrestricted movement of people and ideas, the last expressed most vigorously in a very free press.

In other respects the democratic foundations of the nation were not so secure. The All-India Congress Committee had once elected representatives from the states, these in turn sent up by Congress bodies at the *taluk* and district levels. More significantly, the chief ministers of Congress-ruled states were chosen by the local legislators alone. However, after the Congress split in 1969, Mrs Gandhi was able to place her own candidates in key positions. This centralizing process was confirmed after her spectacular victory in the elections of 1971. Later in the year she sacked, in quick succession, the chief ministers of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, replacing them with her own favourites. As one journal remarked, it mattered little who would be the new man in Andhra. For 'he that ascends the *gaddi* [seat of power] will have to look for his survival to the lady in Delhi rather than to the Legislators in Hyderabad or the Constituents in Andhra at large.'[8]

After the elections of 1971 the prime minister's second son, Sanjay, became more visible in public life. Expelled from his first Indian school, and graduating with difficulty from the second, he had served a brief apprenticeship with Rolls-Royce in the UK before returning home to start a car factory of his own. While he looked for land for that project he took his first steps in politics. In May 1971 he was sent by his mother to inaugurate the Congress campaign in the Delhi municipal polls. The next month he gave an interview to a widely read weekly, where he struck his questioner as not 'particularly keen on discussion or prolonged dialogue. He seems to be keen on results . . .' Sanjay also offered the opinion that 'the Indian youth are lily-livered. They have no guts. In their thinking they are dovetailed to the mental framework of their parents.'[9]

The prime minister's first born son, Rajiv, was attained pilot working for Indian Airlines. She worried more about Sanjay, writing to a colleague in February 1971 that 'Rajiv has a job but Sanjay doesn't and is also involved in an expensive venture. He is so much like I was at that age – rough edges and all – that my heart aches for the suffering he may have to bear.'[10] As it happened, Sanjay's car project was cleared with undue haste. Eighteen applications were received for a licence to make small cars; only that of the prime minister's son was approved, despite his having no past experience in this regard. The Congress chief minister of Haryana, Bansi Lal, gave Sanjay's Maruti car company 300 acres of land at a giveaway price.[11]

Questions were asked by opposition MPs in Parliament. These Mrs Gandhi dismissed, but even her closest adviser, P. N. Haksar, expressed reservations. According to one report, he 'advised the Prime Minister to dump [the] Maruti project and extricate herself from her son Sanjay's doings'.[12] The advice was disregarded; Sanjay came to be seen more and more by his mother's side, while Haksar's own influence declined within the Secretariat.

By 1972 the Congress was subject to a creeping nepotism, and to galloping corruption as well. In June 1971 Haksar drew the prime minister's attention to the 'deeply entrenched and institutionalized corruption' in Congress-ruled Rajasthan.[13] Ministers were in collusion with civil servants, taking cuts on government projects. At the central level too, such practices were growing. One Union minister from Assam had mysteriously acquired a great deal of property; another from Madhya Pradesh was alleged to be working hand-in-glove with a French arms dealer, promising contracts in exchange for commissions.[14]

III

On the social front, one indicator of India's distinction was that it had a woman prime minister. What, however, of Indian women in general? While Mrs Gandhi was winning elections and a war, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) had commissioned seventy-five separate studies on the status of women – with regard to the law, the economy, employment, education, health, and so forth.[15] The results were not altogether uplifting. In many ways, the processes of modernization promoted since Independence had increased the gender divide. For instance it was chiefly men who had taken advantage of the improvement in health facilities. This aggravated the sex ratio, which, in 1971, stood at 931 women for 1,000 men. Again, the proportion of women in the industrial labour force had declined, from 31.53 per cent in 1961 to 17.35 per cent in 1971. Factories had once recruited couples, but technical improvements had rendered redundant unskilled jobs previously undertaken by women.

The vast majority of women laboured away in the countryside. Among families of peasant cultivators there were 50 women workers to every 100 male ones; among families that owned no land this figure rose to 78. The most hazardous operations were often the preserve of women, such as the transplantation of rice, which left them vulnerable to intestinal and parasitical infections. To these hazards were added the burdens of child-rearing and fuel and fodder collection, tasks reserved for women and girls alone.[16]

The literacy rate was dismal in general and dire for women: 39.5 per cent of males could read and write in 1971, but only 18.4 per cent of females. A mere 4 percent of women in rural Bihar were literate. The poverty in states such as Bihar and Orissa had led to the mass migration of males in search of work, placing even greater burden son the women.

The ICSSR reported that 'what is possible for women in theory, is seldom within their reach in fact'. Their studies indicated 'that society has failed to frame new norms and institutions to enable women to fulfil the multiple roles expected of them in India today. The majority do not enjoy the rights and the opportunities guaranteed by the Constitution. Increasing dowry and other phenomena, which lower women's status further, indicate a regression from the norms developed during the Freedom Movement'.

Table 21.1 – Number of girls per 100 boys enrolled in educational establishments, 1947 and 1971

	Primary school	*Middle school*	*High school*	*University*
1947	36	22	14	19
1971	62	43	36	31

The forces of social reform had an impact only in the cities, among high-caste, English-literate families, who educated their girls and sent them to professional colleges. Among this select section, there was an increase in the number of women doctors, professors, civil servants, even scientists. On the other hand many lower-class and farming communities had changed from offering a brideprice to demanding a dowry, this a clear indication of the declining status of their women. Rapid urbanization and male migration had also led to an increased traffic in sex workers.

A heartening sign was an increase in the percentage of eligible women voting in elections: from 46.6 per cent in 1962 to 55.4 per cent in 1967 and 59.1 per cent in 1971. In the early seventies there were also signs of an incipient feminist movement, with the first organizations being formed to protect the rights of women workers and labourers, and to protest against rising prices.[17]

As with low castes, there were two ways to look at the question. From one perspective women were still grievously exploited; from another, there had indeed been progress, given the pitifully low baseline at Independence and the accumulated history of women's oppression, legitimized by both history and tradition. Thus, while the literacy rate remained shockingly low, given what it was before 1947 the development since had 'been phenomenal', as Table 21.1 indicates.

The most visible gains were in India's southernmost state, Kerala. Here, the sex ratio of women to men was 1.019, comfortably the highest (indeed, it was the only state to have more women than men). It ranked first in female life expectancy (60.7 years), in women's education (over 60 per cent, against a national average of less than 20 per cent), in expenditure on health care percapita, and in the proportion of births attended by trained midwives. Kerala also had the lowest infant mortality rate for girls: 48.5 for every 1,000 births.[18]

Kerala was an exception not merely for women. Here, men too were better educated, and had access to better health facilities. The statistics represented a more substantive social equality. There had been a remarkable assertion of the lower castes – untouchability had been more-or-less extinguished – as well as of the lower classes – the Kerala trade union movement was the most highly developed in India.

Why was Kerala so different? As explained in Chapter 14, it had a history of progressive Maharajas and missionaries, and of major social movements oriented around both caste and class.

These reforming traditions were picked up by the first communist administration in 1957-9, and renewed further in the early seventies, when the state was ruled by a CPI-Congress alliance under the chief ministership of the communist C. Achuta Menon. This government transferred large amounts of land from absentee owners to cultivating tenants, and passed a new Agricultural Workers Act to enhance the wages and living conditions of the landless. Although these reforms fell short of what was demanded by radical intellectuals, they were much in advance of what was on offer elsewhere, furthering Kerala's reputation as, if not exactly egalitarian, certainly the least unjust state in India.[19]

IV

In March 1973 the government appointed a new chief justice of the Supreme Court. In the past, once a chief justice retired, the most senior member of the bench took his place. This time, Justice A. N. Ray was elevated while three colleagues were ahead of him. The choice was politically motivated, a manifestation of the government's increasing desire to control the judiciary. The law minister, H. R. Gokhale, had, in Parliament no less, spoken with contempt of the Court's recourse to 'the now archaic and long-past dead theories of Blackstone who regarded property as a natural right'. This attitude, he warned, stood in the way of the government's commitment to restructure 'the entire socio-economic fabric of our country [through] greater and greater State intervention'.[20]

In recent years the Supreme Court had been critical of attempts to disturb the basic structure of the Indian Constitution. Recent judgements in two recent cases concerning bank nationalization and the privy purse had been unfavourable to the government, forcing it to use the power of Parliament to amend the constitution. Meanwhile, in a public lecture in Bombay, Justice K. S. Hegde had expressed concern that the 'political exigencies and self-interest of individual leaders [had] perverted the working of the administrative machinery'. He thought that 'the centre has encroached on the powers reserved to the states, by recourse to extra-constitutional methods'. And he commented on the growing corruption, of 'too much hankering after pelf and patronage'.[21]

In the first weeks of 1973 the Supreme Court heard a petition challenging a new law which gave Parliament greater powers to amend the constitution. A full bench heard the case – with six judges voting to restrict Parliament's power, seven upholding them. Among those voting on the government's side was Justice A. N. Ray; among those on the other side, Justice Hegde. Ray's elevation was linked to this particular case, as well as to amore general view, held by P. N. Haksar most forcefully, that judges as well as civil servants should be 'committed' to the policies and philosophy of the government in power.

Among the critics of the appointment of A. N. Ray was the veteran Sarvodaya leader Jayaprakash Narayan. He wrote to the prime minister asking whether these out-of-turn promotions were intended to make the Supreme Court 'a creature of the government ofthe day'. She answered that the 'dismal conclusion' was unwarranted, adding that a mechanical adherence to the 'seniority principle had led to an unduly high turnover of chief justices'.[22] Another critic was the constitutional expert A. G. Noorani, who in a thoughtful essay deplored both the politicization of judges – many of whom had begun speaking on matters well outside their purview – and of the judiciary, as manifested in the elevation of A. N. Ray and other professedly 'progressive' judges. Noorani worried that neither the press nor the Bar was sufficiently alert to the threats to judicial independence. Unless these challenges were met, he warned, 'we might as well resign ourselves to the loss of individual liberty in India'.[23]

In fact, even before the new chief justice was chosen, many key jobs in government had been assigned to bureaucrats who shared the socialist ideology of Mrs Gandhi and heradvisers.[24] By 1973 this ideology had extended out into ever newer areas. There was now a Monopoly and Restrictive Trade Practices Commission, which sought to curb the growth of big business houses and instead encourage small-scale enterprise. There was a continuing expansion of the public sector and afresh nationalization of private industry. Those key resources, coal and oil, were now under government ownership. The oil crisis of April 1973 hit India nevertheless; when it came, the prime minister, in a spectacular and much-publicized show of nonchalance, rode from her home to Parliament in a horse-drawn buggy.

Half-way into her third term in office, Indira Gandhi looked in control, so much so that she had even begun negotiations with Sheikh Abdullah. The position of the Kashmir Valley, long and bitterly contested, had been altered by India's emphatic victory in the war of December 1971. Now, it was reported, there was a 'measure of disillusionment' in the secessionist camp. Even radicals in the Valley were talking of a settlement within the framework of the Indian Constitution.[25]

In his own recent statements, the Sheikh had left it unclear what he meant by 'self-determination': was it autonomy, or was it independence? Throughout 1971 he had been living in Delhi, so had witnessed at first hand Mrs Gandhi's emergence as a national leader. The war made him less confused; it now appeared that independence for his people was quite out of the question. In June 1972 he met the prime minister. The contents of the talks were kept secret, but shortly afterwards he was allowed back into Kashmir. As ever, he was greeted with large and mostly cheering crowds. But there were also some dissenters holding up placards saying 'No Bargaining on Kashmir' and 'We Want Plebiscite'.[26]

Back in 1964, by sending Abdullah to meet Ayub Khan, Jawaharlal Nehru had apparently accepted that Pakistan was a party to the Kashmir dispute. Now, after that country's bifurcation, Mrs Gandhi made it clear that this was no longer the case. After his return to the Valley, Abdullah told his people that they should not look towards Islamabad for help; instead, they should work out an honourable accommodation with New Delhi. In September, while speaking at a function to mark his sixty-seventh birthday, the Sheikh went so far as to say that 'I am an Indian and India is my homeland'.[27]

Abdullah hoped now to return as chief minister, and from that position work for greater autonomy for the state. He wanted the government to hold mid-term elections, which he was confident his National Conference would win. However, this was resisted by the state Congress leaders, who would not give up their posts so easily.

During 1972 and 1973 there were many rounds of talks between Mirza Afzal Beg, representing the Sheikh, and G. Parthasarathi, representing the prime minister. These discussed the means by which Abdullah could be reinstated without damaging either Kashmirisentiments or Congress ambitions.[28]

At the other end of the Himalaya there were signs that more Nagas, too, were thinking of living within India. From its creation in 1963, Nagaland had been ruled by a faction at ease with the Indian Constitution. There remained insurgents in the jungle, and the occasional attacks on army convoys and mainstream politicians. But there were signs of normality as well. For example, in November 1972 the evangelist Billy Graham came to preach in Kohima, and 25,000 Nagas came to hear him, being bussed in from all parts of the state. Graham gave three sermons in as many days, praising the beauty of the hills, deploring the ramshackle condition of the local churches and asking the Nagas to 'commit everything to God'. A year later, India's leading football club, Mohun Bagan, came and played a

series of exhibition matches in Kohima. In the first match, 'amidst great excitement and shouts from a jubilant crowd of about fifteen thousand', a Kohima XI beat the visitors by one goal. The next day, India's honour was restored when Mohun Bagan won the return match by five goals to nil.

On 1 December 1973 Indira Gandhi visited Kohima to mark the tenth anniversary of Nagaland becoming a full-fledged state of the Indian Union. In her speech – heard by an estimated 15,000 people – she urged the underground to 'come out and shoulder the responsibilities of building up Nagaland'. Several hundred rebels had already surrendered, and more came overground before the state elections of February 1974. For good or ill, the Nagas were getting a taste of Indian democracy. Thus, when the polls came, the streets were overrun by young men yelling '"Vote for . . ." at full blast', for 'a plate of rice and meat, and a sip of wine and a few currency [notes] are all that is needed to set a canvaser [sic] go a shouting for any prospective candidate'. Meanwhile, 'promises, particularly from ministers, are flowing generously. A club, dispensary, a school building for long neglected schools, a road where no road was . . . are promised even though for the past ten years there had been nothing done for them.'[29]

These elections brought a coalition government to power. It included several former rebels, who said they wanted to work for 'a final, negotiated settlement', to be brought about by 'faith, not guns'. A Delhi journal wrote hopefully that 'by and large the Nagas have been reconciled and if the Government of India diverts more funds for education, employment and economic development, the "hard core" will crack in the course of time, and there will be peace which is so urgently and vitally required in this border state'.[30]

V

In its time as an independent nation, India had faced conflicts aplenty – conflicts around land, language, region, religion. Of these the troubles in Kashmir and Nagaland had perhaps been the most serious. Ever since 1947 there had been charismatic leaders in both places, seeking a free state of their own. Their message had resonated widely among the people. Were they given the option, a majority of the inhabitants of the Naga hills as well as the Kashmir Valley might very well have chosen independence rather than statehood within India.

In 1973–4, however, Sheikh Abdullah was preparing to rejoin the system in Kashmir, and many rebel Nagas had come overground and taken part in elections. The once turbulent extremities were quiet. As if to compensate, there was now trouble in the heartland, in parts of the country which, for reasons of history, politics, tradition and language, had long considered themselves integral parts of the Republic of India.

The trouble began in Gujarat, the land of Gandhi, the Father of the Nation. The state was run by a Congress regime notorious for its corruption; the chief minister, Chimanbhai Patel, was popularly known as Chiman *chor* (thief). In January 1974 students led a movement demanding the dismissal of the state government. It called itself Nav Nirman, the Movement for Regeneration. The protests turned violent, with buses and government offices being burnt. Chiman *chor* was compelled to resign, and Gujarat came under President's Rule.[31]

The events in Gujarat inspired students in Bihar to launch a struggle against misgovernance in their own state. Bihar had witnessed a great deal of political instability, with defections galore and governments made and unmade. A Congress regime came to power in 1972, but within it corruption was rife. There was deep discontent in the countryside, where land was very unequally held; and in

the cities, where there had been a steep rise in the prices of essential commodities. Left-wing groupings, led by the Communist Party of India, had formed a front with simple aims and a complicated name – Bihar Rajya Mahangai Abhaab Pesha Kar Virodhi Mazdur Swa Karamchari Sangharsha Samiti (The Bihar State Struggle Committee of Workers and Employees against Price Rise and Professional Tax). In the last week of 1973 the front organized a series of mass demonstrations, where the call was heard, '*Pura rashan pura kam, nahin to hoga chakka jam*' – 'Give us work and give us food, or else we will bring life to a standstill'. Which is exactly what they did.

These protests by the left sparked a competitive rivalry with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student union linked to the Jana Sangh. The ABVP and other, non-communist student groups came together in a united front of their own, the Chatra Sangharsh Samiti (CSS). This grew rapidly, and soon had branches in most towns of the state. Campus life was in turmoil, and classroom instruction came to an abrupt halt.

On 18 March 1974 the CSS marched on the state assembly in Patna. When police pushed them back, the retreating mob set fire to government buildings, a warehouse of the Food Corporation of India and two newspaper offices. The police clashed with protestors in several parts of the city; several students were badly hurt, and at least three died. The news of the trouble spread, provoking clashes between students and the police across the state.[32]

After the incidents of 18 March the students asked Jayaprakash Narayan to step in and lead their movement. 'JP' was now seventy-one, a veteran of movements militant as well as peaceful, the upholderor instigator of a hundred mostly worthy causes. In recent years he had worked for reconciliation in Nagaland and Kashmir, sought sympathetically to understand the Naxalites and persuaded the notorious bandits of the Chambal valley to lay down their arms. The call from the students was one he found impossible to refuse. For, long ago, he had started out as a student radical himself. But that had been in the American state of Wisconsin; this was in his own native state of Bihar.

In Jawaharlal Nehru's lifetime, Narayan had many exchanges with India's prime minister. The older man tried to get him to join his Cabinet, but JP preferred to stay outside. From there he chastised and scolded Nehru, but he was withal devoted to him, and devastated by his death. Through their friendship he knew the daughter, too. He was one of the first to congratulate Mrs Gandhi on her elevation to prime minister and, in years following, frequently offered her (unsolicited) advice. He applauded her leadership during the Bangladesh war, but was less approving of her conduct during the presidential election and (as we have seen) with regard to the supersession of the judges of the Supreme Court.[33]

When the Chatra Sangharsh Samiti asked him to lead their movement, JP agreed, on two conditions – that it should be scrupulously nonviolent, and that it should not be restricted to Bihar. On 19 March, immediately after the clashes in Patna, Narayan said he could no longer 'remain a silent spectator to misgovernment, corruption and the rest, whether in Patna, Delhi or elsewhere'. It is not for this that I had fought for freedom', he continued. He had now 'decided to fight corruption and misgovernment and blackmarketing, profiteering and hoarding, to fight for the overhaul of the educational system, and for a real people's democracy'.[34]

Narayan was a figure of great moral authority, a hero of the freedom struggle who, unlike so many others of the ilk, had not been sullied by the loaves and fishes of office. His entry gave the struggle a great boost, and also changed its name; what was till then the 'Bihar movement' now became the 'JP movement'. He asked students to boycott classes, to leave their studies for a year and

work at raising the consciousness of the people. All across Bihar there were clashes between students seeking to shut down schools and colleges, and policemen called in by the authorities to keep them open. In the towns, at least, the support for the struggle was widespread. In Gaya, for example, the courts and offices were closed as a consequence of 'housewives of respectable families of the town who were rarely seen out of [purdah] sitting on [picket lines] with small boys'. The authorities tried to clear the streets, but this provoked violence, with students raining bottles and sticks on the police and being answered by bullets. The riot left three people dead and twenty grievously injured.[35]

The Gaya incident took place in the middle of April 1974. The call was now renewed for the dissolution of the state assembly, for the imposition of President's Rule following the example of Gujarat. On 5 June Narayan led a massive procession through the streets of Patna. The march culminated in a meeting at the Gandhi Maidan, where JP called for a 'total revolution' to redeem the unfulfilled promises of the freedom movement. India had been free for twenty-seven years, said JP, yet hunger, soaring prices and corruption stalk everywhere. The people are being crushed under all sorts of injustice'.

Addressing himself to the students in the crowd, he warned that the road ahead would be a rocky one: 'You will have to make sacrifices, undergo sufferings, face lathis and bullets, fill up jails. Properties will be attached.' Yet, he was convinced that, in the end, the struggle would be worth it: 'Gandhiji spoke of Swaraj [freedom] in one year. I speak today of real people's government in one year. In one year the right form of education will emerge. Give one year to build a new country, a newBihar.'[36]

It was in this meeting that JP spoke of 'total revolution' for the first time. The term, the struggle and the struggle's chosen agents all recall the activities a decade previously of the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. In the late evening of his life, Mao had called upon the youth – in his case, the Chinese Red Guard – to rid society of its accumulated corruptions, to stamp out revisionists and capitalist-roaders who stood in the way of the creation of the perfect society. Robert Jay Lifton has suggested that the Cultural Revolution in China was impelled by its leader's frustrations at the gap between expectations and reality, by his impatient desire to transform his country before he left this earth. I find the argument persuasive, not least because it also helps explain the events in Bihar and India in 1974, this sudden turn towards radical politics by a man who, for so many years past, had disavowed politics altogether. Throughout the 1950s and 60s JP had been a social worker, are conciler, a bridge-builder. Now, like Mao, he turned to the students, to what he called *yuvashakti* (youth power), to bring about the total revolution he had dreamed about in his own younger days.[37]

In between the Gaya firings and JP's Patna speech, the country was paralysed by arailway strike. Led by the socialist George Fernandes, the strike lasted three weeks, bringing the movement of people and goods to a halt. As many as a million railway men participated. Western Railways, which serviced the country's industrial hub, was worst hit. There were militant demonstrations in many towns and cities – in several places, the army was called out to maintain the peace.[38]

While the strike was on, India exploded a nuclear device. For several years now scientists had been pressing the government to conduct an atomic test. When the prime minister finally agreed, in May 1974, it was because the test helped to divert attention from the challenges posed by the railwaymen and the students in Bihar. Among certain sections the blast led to a surge of patriotic pride. There was, a reporter wrote, an 'unmistakable air of excitement in Delhi' when the news of the explosion came through. MPs gathered in the Central Hall of Parliament to congratulate one another – for them, 'the railway strike and the country's numerous economic problems had suddenly disappeared from view'.[39]

Others were less impressed, pointing out that membership of the elite nuclear club could not wish away the fact that India ranked 102nd among the nations of the world in terms of per-capita income. The test was also deplored in Pakistan, as a setback to the normalization of relations between the two countries.[40]

Following the nuclear test, Mrs Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan exchanged a series of letters, the exchange beginning on a civil note but ending in acrimony. On 22 May the prime minister wrote to JP expressing concern about his health, and hoping that, in view of the long friendship between the two families, their political disagreements could be expressed 'without personal bitterness or questioning of each other's motives'. Narayan answered that Mrs Gandhi was being disingenuous, for in a recent speech in Bhubaneshwar she had alluded to JP keeping the company of the rich and 'living in the posh guest-houses of big businessmen'. Those remarks, he said, had 'hurt and angered me'. He added that her recent utterances seemed 'not only to misunderstand me profoundly butalso to miss – and to do so at the risk of tragic consequences – the meaning of the upsurge that is welling up from below'.

Mrs Gandhi replied immediately, clarifying that, in those remarks about the corruption of Sarvodaya leaders, 'I did not take your name or make any references personally derogatory to you. I cannot help if some newspapers added their own interpretation.' (This *was* disingenuous – the interpretation of the newspapers was the only one possible in the circumstances.) She suggested that even if he was incorruptible perhaps his associates were not. That was why some of his ideas, 'which appear rather utopian to me, could perhaps work if the whole population consisted of Jayaprakashs'. Mrs Gandhi also challenged his claim to be the nation's moral conscience. As she wrote, 'May I also, in all humility, put to you that it is possible that others, who may not be your followers, are equally concerned about the country, about the people's welfare, and about the need to cleanse public life of weakness and corruption.'

The exchange was concluded by JP six weeks after it began. He had hoped, he said, that she would have the grace to clarify *publicly* that in making those remarks in Bhubaneshwar she was not casting aspersions on his probity or character. That she would not do this hurt him; as he putit, 'I am only a private citizen but I do have my self-respect.' What seemed clear was that 'misunderstanding is growing and not lessening by correspondence between us'.[41]

It was time to return to the movement. In August JP toured the Bihar countryside to a rapturous reception. 'JP is driven in procession . . . cheering onlookers line the roads', wrote the journalist Ajit Bhattacharjea in his diary. Arches every hundred yards or so. The cars inch through the crowd to the podium – JP helped up the steps, pausing at every one.' After his tour, Narayan called for a conference of all opposition parties – the CPI excluded – to 'channel the enthusiasm among the people into the nation-wide people's movement'. The Bihar struggle, wrote JP, had 'acquired an all-India importance and the country's fate has come to be bound up with its success and failure'. He appealed to trade unions, peasant organizations and professional bodies to come aboard.[42]

At least one opposition party was already present in the JP movement – the Jana Sangh. Its student wing, the ABVP, had been there from the beginning, and older cadres were now moving into key roles. A Gandhian associate of JP wrote to him in alarm that 'the leadership of the movement, at least at local levels, is passing into the hands of the Jana Sangh'. He also worried that 'the common man has yet to be educated into the ways and values of our movement, whose appeal to him continues to be more negative than constructive'.[43]

A more detailed critique of JP's movement was offered by R. K. Patil, a former ICS officer who had later become an admired social worker in rural Maharashtra. At JP's invitation, Patil spent two

weeks in Bihar, travelling through the state and talking to a wide cross-section of people. In along (and remarkable) letter he wrote to Narayan – dated 4October 1974 -he conceded that 'there can be no doubt about the tremendous popular enthusiasm generated by the movement'. He saw 'unprecedented crowds attending your meetings in pin-drop silence'. However, when they were on their own these crowds were less disciplined, as in the attacks on the state assembly and the forcible prevention of the Bihar governor from delivering his annual address.

Patil wondered whether the modes of protest being adopted in Bihar conformed strictly to Gandhian standards. But he went further, asking the question: 'What is the scope for Satyagraha and direct action in a formal democracy like ours . . .?' By demanding the dismissal of a duly elected assembly, argued Patil, 'the Bihar agitation is both unconstitutional and undemocratic'. True, the electoral process had to be reformed, made more transparent and purged of the influence of power and money. Yet once an election was held its verdict had to be honoured. For 'there is no other way of ascertaining the general opinion of the people in a Nation-State, except through free and fair elections'.

Patil wrote, in conclusion, that he was 'well aware of the patent drawbacks of the Government presided over by Indira Gandhi'.But he still wasn't certain that it was wise to substitute for the law of "Government by Discussion", the law of "Government by Public Street Opinion"'. 'Today you are a force for good', wrote Patil to JP, 'but History records that the crowds can produce a Robespierre also. Hence perhaps my instinctive aversion to the Bihar type agitation.'[44]

On 1 November 1974 Mrs Gandhi and JP had a long meeting in New Delhi. The prime minister agreed to dismiss the Bihar ministry on condition that the movement drop its demand for the dissolution of other state assemblies. The compromise was rejected. The meeting was acrimonious, although it ended on a poignant note, with JP handing over to Mrs Gandhi the letters written by her mother, Kamala Nehru, to Narayan's recently deceased wife,Prabhavati.[45]

Three days later Narayan was manhandled by the police while on his way to a public meeting in Patna. While warding off a baton, he stumbled to the ground; the picture was splashed across the newspapers the next day. He was an old man as well as a sick one (he suffered from diabetes), and although the injuries were slight the indignity provoked much outrage. The Bihar administration was compared to its colonial predecessor – as one journal somewhat hyperbolically wrote, JP was, for the first time in free India, a victim of police repression.'[46]

VI

In September 1974 the Republic of India acquired a chunk of territory that previously constituted the quasi-independent state of Sikkim. While Sikkim had its own flag and currency, and was ruled by its hereditary monarch – known as the Chogyal – it was economically and militarily dependent on New Delhi. In 1973 some citizens of the kingdom had begun asking for a representative assembly. The Chogyal asked the government of India for help in taming the rebellion. Instead, New Delhi stoked it further. When an assembly was proposed and elections held, the pro-India party won all but one seat. The Chogyal was forced to abdicate, and the Indian Constitution was amended to make Sikkim an 'associate state', with representation in Parliament.[47]

Sikkim was a very beautiful state, and also shared a border with China. At another time, the prime minister would have drawn comfort from this augmentation of the nation's territory. As it happened, the Sikkim annexation provided Mrs Gandhi with only a temporary diversion from her

battle with Jayaprakash Narayan. For by the end of 1974 the Bihar movement was poised to become a truly national one. Letters of support for JP were streaming in from all over the country, as in a communication from an advocate in Andhra Pradesh which saluted JP for 'breaking new ground at an age where people retire', and professed 'admiration and respect at the movement you are directing'.[48] Prominent politicians would come visiting Bihar, and promise to take the ideas of the struggle back to their own states. In the last week of November JP convened a meeting of opposition parties in New Delhi, where he expressed the view that the lesson of Bihar was that one needed 'radical changes all round, on institutional as well as moral planes, involving drastic changes in Government policies in the centre as well as in the States'.[49]

It is tempting to see the JP movement as being a reprise, at the all-India level, of the popular struggle against the communist government in Kerala in 1958–9. The parallels are uncanny. On the one side was a legally elected government suspected of wishing to subvert the constitution. On the other side was a mass movement drawing in opposition parties and many non-political or apolitical bodies. Like Mannath Pad-manabhan, JP was a leader of unquestioned probity, a saint who had been called upon to save politics from the politicians. His behaviour was, or was perceived to be, in stark contrast to that of his principal adversary – for, like E. M. S. Namboodiripad in 1958–9, Mrs Gandhi had no desire to accede to her opponents' demand and voluntary demit power.

This was a political rivalry, but also a personal one. As a veteran of the freedom struggle, and as a comrade of her father's, Jayaprakash Narayan would regard Mrs Gandhi as something of an upstart. For her part, having recently won an election and a war, the prime minister saw JP as a political naif who would have been better off sticking to social work.

By the end of 1974 the polarization was very nearly complete. There were many Indians who were not members of the right-wing Jana Sangh, and yet thought the Congress too corrupt and Mrs Gandhi too insensitive to criticism. Some went so far as to hail JP's movement as a 'second freedom struggle', completing the business left unfinished by the first. There were many other Indians, not necessarily members of the Congress yet pained by JP making common cause with the Jana Sangh, who saw his movement as undermining the institutions of representative democracy. The first kind of Indian criticized Indira Gandhi, and with much force; the second kind criticized JP, albeit with less enthusiasm.[50]

In the first week of January 1975, a key aide of the prime minister was assassinated in JP's home state of Bihar. This was L. N. Mishra, who had held various Cabinet appointments under Mrs Gandhi and, more crucially, was a major fundraiser for the Congress party. A politician wholly *sans* ideology, Mishra had collected large sums of money from both the Soviets and the Indian business class. It was not clear who murdered him – whether a personal rival, or a trade unionist bitter about his role in the suppression of the railway strike of 1974. The prime minister blamed it on the 'cult of violence' allegedly promoted by Jayaprakash Narayan and his movement.[51]

Mishra's death did not impede JP's plans to march on Parliament in the spring, when the weather would be more hospitable to protesters from across the country. During January and February he travelled across India to drum up support.[52] In his speeches JP urged the people to remain non-violent; any untoward incidents, he said, would prompt the prime minister to assume dictatorial powers. At several places he claimed that Mrs Gandhi was looking for an excuse to arrest him. That, he predicted, would only make the movement more widespread, as in 1942, when the jailing of Mahatma Gandhi had led to an intensification of the Quit India movement.

JP compared himself to Gandhi implicitly and, more explicitly, the Congress regime to the colonial state. These were comparisons the prime minister naturally rejected. In an interview given to

a Japanese journalist she said that, while she was not certain what the JP movement was for, 'it is clear what it is against. It is against my party, it is against me personally and all that I have stood for and stand for today.'

In fact, there were by now some members of Mrs Gandhi's party who had some sympathy for the other side. Among them were the erstwhile 'Young Turks' Chandra Shekhar and Mohan Dharia. Shekhar and Dharia called for a national dialogue on questions of rising prices, corruption and unemployment – issues, they said, that were so conspicuously flagged in the Congress's own 1971 manifesto.

Another man caught betwixt and between was Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah. The government and he had finally come to an agreement, by which the Congress Legislature Party of Jammu and Kashmir would elect him as their leader, and hence also as their chief minister. Two days before his installation he went to the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Delhi to seek the blessings of his old friend and supporter Jayaprakash Narayan. The newspapers carried a photograph of the two in a bear hug, the Kashmiri towering above the Gandhian.

JP told the press that he welcomed the Sheikh's return to Kashmir; the state, he said, needed him at its helm. But his friends in the Jana Sangh attacked the accord which had brought the Lion of Kashmir back to power. The party President, L. K. Advani, claimed that Abdullah still 'wanted to use the instrument of power to pursue his ambition of an independent Kashmir'. Others saw the matter very differently. After the Sheikh was sworn in as chief minister on 25 February, the *Indian Express* called it an 'epochal event in the history of free India'. Abdullah's return to his old post, twenty-three years after he had been forced to leave it, was 'a tribute to the resilience and maturity of Indian democracy, for it is only in a true democratic set-up that even the most serious differences can be harmonised and reconciliations effected within the framework of common loyalty to the country'.

The Kashmir chapter seemed, finally, closed. Jayaprakash Narayan was delighted that Sheikh Abdullah had rejoined the mainstream. On this, and perhaps this alone, Mrs Gandhi and he saw eye to eye. For on the very day that Abdullah was reading the oath in Jammu, JP called for a 'national stir' to oust the 'corrupt Congress leaders from power'. The Jana Sangh joined him here even as they opposed him on Kashmir – such were the contradictions of Indian politics.

On 2 March, four days before the planned march on Parliament, Mrs Gandhi dropped Mohan Dharia from her council of ministers. His mistake had been to request that she resume talks with Narayan. JP's response was to ask senior ministers such as Y. B. Chavan and Jagjivan Ram to resign in protest, thus to 'save their party from destruction', and restore its 'traditional values'.

On 3 March Delhi's inspector general of police convened a meeting on how to handle the coming influx of protesters. As many as 15,000 policemen would be on duty. To inhibit the marchers, the administration forbade the entry of trucks and buses from neighbouring states.

Despite the ban on buses, people began streaming into the capital. They were housed in a tented camp outside the Red Fort, now named 'Jayaprakash Nagar'. On the morning of the 6th they began walking towards the venue of the public meeting, the Boat Club lawns, adjacent to the Houses of Parliament. Leading them, in an open jeep, was Jayaprakash Narayan. JP was cheered by the crowds assembled along the way, who offered garlands and showered him with petals. The slogans on display were chiefly addressed to his rival. 'Vacate the Throne, the People are Coming', said one, in English, with a Hindi variation reading: '*Janata Ka Dil Bol Raha Hai, Indira Ka Singhasan Dol Raha Hai*' (The Heart of the People Is Singing, Indira's Regime Is Sinking). Behind JP came jeeps bearing leaders of the opposition parties. Altogether, it was one of the largest processions ever seen in Delhi, drawing in an estimated 750,000 participants. There were representatives from all over

India, but much the largest contingents came from the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

At the Boat Club lawns JP spoke in an 'emotion-charged voice'. He compared the day's events to Gandhi's historic Salt March, and asked the crowd to be prepared for along struggle. After the meeting he led a delegation to Parliament, where he presented the Speaker with a list of the movement's demands, which included the dissolution of the Bihar assembly, electoral reforms and the setting up of tribunals to investigate allegations a gainst the Congress of rampant corruption.

Mrs Gandhi answered JP two days later, when in a speech at the steel town of Rourkela, she said that the agitators were bent on destroying the fabric of Indian democracy. Without mentioning her antagonist by name, she claimed his movement was nourished by foreign donations.

On 18 March JP led a march in Patna to mark the first anniversary of the movement. There was much singing and dancing, and the throwing of colour, this also being the day of the Holi festival. In his speech Narayan urged the formation of a single opposition party or, at the very least, of a common front to fight the Congress in all future elections.

JP's movement was strongly rooted in the northern states. He had supporters in the west, in Gujarat particularly, but the south was territory so far mostly untouched. So he now commenced a long tour of the states south of the Vindhyas, drawing decent but by no means massive crowds. In Tamil Nadu people warmly recalled that he had been against the imposition ofHindi.[53]

VII

While the JP movement was gaining ground, the prime minister was facing another kind of challenge, a challenge offered not through passionate sloganeering in the streets but in the cold language of the law. The scene here was the Allahabad High Court, which was hearing a petition filed by Raj Narain, the socialist who had lost to Mrs Gandhi in the Rae Bareilly parliamentary election of 1971. The petition alleged that the prime minister had won through corrupt practices, in particular by spending more money than was allowed, and by using, in her campaign, the official machinery and officials in government service. Throughout 1973 and 1974 the case dragged on, arguments and counterarguments being presented before the judge, Justice Jag Mohan Lal Sinha.[54]

On 19 March 1975 Mrs Indira Gandhi became the first Indian prime minister to testify in court. She was in the witness box for five hours, answering questions about her election. In coming to Allahabad, the prime minister had left her son Sanjay behind in Delhi. With her instead was her elder son Rajiv, who, while his mother spoke in court, 'took his Italian wife, Sonia, to see the ancestral home of the Nehrus'.[55]

In April, Morarji Desai – an even older rival of Mrs Gandhi than JP – began a fast in Gujarat in protest against the continuation of President's Rule. New Delhi backed down, ordering fresh elections for June. The opposition parties began the process of forming a common front to fight the Congress.

As Gujarat went to the polls in the second week of June, L. K. Advani said the campaign had 'accelerated the polarisation of political parties and the Jana Sangh would try to further this process'. He looked forward to his party increasing its strength 'manifold'.[56]

While the votes were being counted, attention shifted to the High Court in Allahabad. On the morning of 12 June, in Room No. 15 of a court in which Mrs Gandhi's father and grandfather had both practised, Justice Sinha read out hisjudgement in the case brought before him three years previously by Raj Narain. He acquitted the prime minister on twelve out of fourteen counts. The charges he found

her guilty of were, first, that the UP government constructed high rostrums to allow her to address her election meetings 'from a dominating position'; and second, that her election agent, Yashpal Kapoor, was still in government employment at the time the campaign began. By the judgement, her election to Parliament was rendered null and void. However, the justice allowed Mrs Gandhi a stay of twenty days on his order, to allow an appeal in the Supreme Court.[57]

The 12th of June was a very bad day for Mrs Gandhi. Early in the morning she was told that her old associate D. P. Dhar had died during the night. A little later came the news from Gujarat, which was also grim – the Janata Front was heading for a majority in the state elections. Then, finally, came this last and most telling blow, from her own home town, Allahabad.

The judgement sparked much prurient interest in the intentions of the judge. Educated in Aligarh, Justice Sinha had practised in Bareilly for fourteen years before becoming a district judge. He had been elevated to the bench in 1970. Some claimed that his judgement was biased by the fact that he and JP came from the same Kayasth caste. Others believed that in the days before the judgement the prime minister's men had offered him a seat on the Supreme Court were he to rule in their mistress's favour.[58]

Mrs Gandhi's election had been overturned on a quite minor charge, yet Justice Sinha's verdict also concentrated the popular mind on the more serious accusations levelled against her by JP's movement. The day after the judgement, opposition politicians began a *dharna* outside Rashtrapati Bhavan, demanding that the president dismiss the 'corrupt' prime minister. In Patna, JP issued a statement saying it would be 'shameful and cynical' were Mrs Gandhi to listen to the 'yes-men' around her and stay on in office. He also noted that the Gujarat election results suggested that the 'Indira wave' and 'Indira magic' were matters of the past.

On the other side, the yes-men were very busy indeed. On the 13th itself, the Congress chief minister of Haryana, Bans iLal, began ferrying supporters into Delhi, publicly to proclaim their loyalty to Mrs Gandhi. The roads outside the prime minister's house were choked with her admirers. These shouted slogans in her favour and burnt effigies of Justice Sinha. Mrs Gandhi came out to address them, speaking of how foreign powers were conspiring with her domestic opponents to get rid of her. Her adversaries, she claimed, had 'lots of money at their disposal'.

Every day a fresh cadre of supporters would assemble outside Mrs Gandhi's house; every day she would come out and speak to them. Some Congress members privately deplored these populist demonstrations. Others publicly encouraged them. Addressing a Congress rally in Delhi, the party president, Dev Kanta Barooah, said that 'laws are made by people and the leader of the people is Mrs Gandhi'. Judges and lawyers, including the eminent legal luminary M. C. Chagla – once a member of Mrs Gandhi's own Cabinet – thought the prime minister was morally bound to resign, at least until her appeal was heard and disposed of. On the other side, 516 party MPs signed a resolution urging her to stay on. Ten thousand Congress members from Karnataka signed a similar appeal, in blood. In the middle of the debate a voice spoke from across the border – it was Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who worried that Mrs Gandhi would find a way out of her difficulties through 'an adventurist course against Pakistan'.

On 20 June Mrs Gandhi addressed a huge rally on the Boat Club lawns. A million people were said to have attended, even more than had heard JP at the same venue three months previously. The prime minister claimed the opposition was bent on liquidating her physically. Speaking after her, D. K. Barooah read out a couplet he had specially composed for the occasion:

Indira tere subah kijai, tere sham kijai,

Tere kam hi jai tere naam ki jai

Or, to render it in less expressive English:

> Indira, we salute your morning and your evening too
> We celebrate your name and your great work too.

Two days later the opposition answered with a rally of its own. It rained heavily, yet hundreds of thousands came. JP was the featured speaker, but his flight from Calcutta was cancelled at the last minute ('mechanical trouble', according to Indian Airlines). Representatives of the main opposition parties spoke, with Morarji Desai calling for a do or die' movement to get rid of the Indira Gandhi regime.

On 23 June the Supreme Court began hearing Mrs Gandhi's petition. The next day Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer issued a conditional stay on the Allahabad judgement: the prime minister could attend Parliament, he said, but could not vote there until her appeal was fully heard and pronounced upon. The *Indian Express* thought this meant that Mrs Gandhi 'must resign forthwith in the nation's and her interests'.

By now, at least some senior figures in the Congress Party thought that resignation would also be in the party's interests. If she couldn't vote in Parliament, she could scarcely lead her government to any purpose. She was advised to step down temporarily, to let one of her Cabinet colleagues – the uncontroversial Swaran Singh perhaps – keep the seat warm until the Supreme Court upheld her appeal (as her lawyers were confident it would), allowing her to return as prime minister.

Urging Mrs Gandhi not to resign were her son Sanjay and the chief minister of West Bengal, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a well-trained barrister who had come from Calcutta to be at hand. Their advice was readily accepted. As Mrs Gandhi later told a biographer, 'What else could I have done except stay? You know the state the country was in. What would have happened if there had been nobody to lead it? I was the only person who could, you know.'[59]

Once the decision was taken, it was executed with remarkable swiftness. On the 25th, S. S. Ray helped draft an ordinance declaring a state of internal emergency, which a pliant president, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad, signed as soon as it was put in front of him. That night the power supply to all of Delhi's newspaper offices was switched off, so that there were no editions on the 26th. Police swooped down on the opposition leaders, taking JP, Morarji Desai and many others off to jail. The next day the public of Delhi, and of India as a whole, was told by state-controlled radio that an emergency had been declared, and all civil liberties suspended.

At the time, and later, it was thought that the reaction far exceeded the original provocation. Justice Sinha had indicted Mrs Gandhi of two quite trifling offences. The Supreme Court was less likely to construe the height of a rostrum as an 'election malpractice'. As for the second charge, Yashpal Kapoor had resigned from service before joining the campaign, except that there was some dispute about the date on which his resignation was accepted. Most lawyers believed that the Supreme Court would reverse the Allahabad judgement. Yet, as one respected Delhi jurist put it, the prime minister forsook 'the advantages of the ordinary judicial remedy of appeal and resorted instead to the extraordinary, undemocratic and unconstitutional measures of Emergency'.[60]

A mere four months before the emergency was declared, the *Indian Express* had paid tribute 'to the resilience and maturity of Indian democracy', of how it allowed 'even the most serious

differences [to] be harmonized and reconciliations effected'. The paper could now eat its words. Indian democracy, *circa* 1975, could reconcile the Valleyof Kashmir to the Union of India, butnot Indira Gandhi with Jayaprakash Narayan.