From Shastri to Indira Gandhi, 1964–1969

Nehru's death in May 1964 provided a test of the strength of the Indian political system. Many, both in India and abroad, predicted that it would be severely damaged, and might even break down through dissension and factional turmoil in the Congress party on the issue of succession. But the succession occurred in a mature, dignified and smooth manner and revealed the strength of Indian democracy. Perhaps, it was because of his faith in Indian democracy that Nehru had refused to name a successor.

There were two main contenders for the leadership of the Congress parliamentary party and therefore for the prime minister's job, Morarji Desai and Lal Bahadur Shastri. Desai was senior and more experienced, a sound administrator and scrupulously honest. But he was rigid and inflexible in outlook and had the reputation of being self-righteous, arrogant, intolerant and a right-winger. Moreover, he was quite unpopular with a large section of the party. Shastri was mild, tactful and malleable, highly respected and known to be personally incorruptible.

The succession occurred under the direction of a group of Congress leaders who came to be collectively known as the Syndicate. The group, formed in 1963, consisted of K. Kamaraj, the Congress president, and regional party bosses, Atulya Ghosh of Bengal, S.K. Patil of Bombay, N. Sanjeeva Reddy of Andhra Pradesh, and S. Nijalingappa of Mysore (Karnataka). Desai was utterly unacceptable to them. They favoured Shastri because, in addition to his other qualities, he had wider acceptability in the party which would keep the party united. They also hoped that he would be more amenable to their wishes and not challenge their leadership in the party.

They, as well as other party leaders, were also keen to avoid a contest, which would intensify the factionalism present in the party. Kamaraj tried to ascertain the candidate around whom there would be wider consensus among the party MPs and announced that Shastri was more generally acceptable. Though privately suggesting that the Syndicate had 'stage-managed' the decision, Desai accepted it and retired from the race in a dignified manner. Shastri, elected unopposed as the parliamentary leader by the party MPs, was sworn in as prime minister on 2 June 1964, that is, within a week of Nehru's death.

The Shastri Years

Accepting the limited character of his political mandate, Shastri did not make any major changes in Nehru's cabinet, except for persuading Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, to join it as Minister of Information and Broadcasting. Under him the cabinet ministers functioned more autonomously. He also did not interfere in party affairs or with the working of the state governments. On the whole, he kept a low political profile except towards the end of his administration.

Though the country was at the time faced with several difficult problems, Shastri's government did not deal with them in a decisive manner; it followed a policy of drift instead. The problem of the official language of Hindi versus English, flared up in early 1965, but the central government

failed to handle it effectively and allowed the situation to deteriorate. The problem was, however, finally resolved in early 1966. The demands for a Punjabi Suba (state) and Goa's merger with Maharashtra were also allowed to simmer.

The Indian economy had been stagnating in the previous few years. There had been a slowdown in the rate of industrial growth and the balance of payments problem had worsened. But, at that moment, the most serious problem was the severe shortage of food. Agricultural production had slowed down, there was severe drought in several states in 1965 and buffer food stocks were depleted to a dangerous extent. Clearly, long-term measures were needed to deal with the situation. But those were not taken, particularly as the chief ministers of foodgrain-surplus states refused to cooperate. After the US suspended all food aid because of the Indo-Pak war, the government was compelled to introduce statutory rationing but it covered only seven major cities. The government also created the State Food Trading Corporation in January 1965, but it did not succeed in procuring a significant amount of foodgrains. However, one positive development was the initiation of the Green Revolution strategy with the purpose of increasing agricultural output and achieving self-sufficiency in food in the long run. It was though only later, in Indira Gandhi's regime, that this strategy was pursued vigorously.

In general, Shastri was accused by critics inside and outside the party of being 'a prisoner of indecision' and of failing to give a direction to government policies or even to lead and control his cabinet colleagues. He felt so unsure and inadequate under pressures of government and comments of the critics that in a private chat with a newsman early in January 1965 he wondered 'whether he had been right to offer himself for the Prime Ministership and whether he had the capacity to carry the burden that the office involved'.[1]

With the passage of time, however, Shastri began to show greater independence and to assert himself, so much so that Kamaraj began to complain that he was quite often being bypassed by Shastri in important decision-making. The Indian government was among the first to criticize the US bombing of North Vietnam. Shastri also set up his own Prime Minister's Secretariat, headed by L.K. Jha, his principal private secretary, as a source of information and advice to the prime minister on policy matters, independent of the ministries. The Secretariat, which came to be known as the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) started acquiring a great deal of influence and power in the making and execution of government policy. Later, under Indira Gandhi, it emerged as a virtually alternative, independent executive. It was, however, with the brief Indo-Pak war in August–September 1965 that Shastri's moment came.

The Kashmir issue had been simmering for years, with Pakistan demanding reopening of the question and India maintaining that Kashmir being a part of India was a settled fact. In 1965, the followers of Sheikh Abdullah and other dissident leaders created a great deal of unrest in the Kashmir Valley. The Pakistani leadership thought that the situation there was ripe for an intervention, especially as Pakistan had superiority in arms, having acquired sophisticated US military equipment. Possibly, the Pakistan government wanted to face India militarily before India's efforts to improve its defences after the debacle of 1962 were still incomplete.

First came the dress rehearsal and a probe. Pakistan tested India's response to a military push

by occupying in April 1965 a part of the disputed and undemarcated territory in the marshy Rann of Kutch, bordering the Arabian Sea and Gujarat. There was a military clash but, because of the nature of the terrain, India's military response was weak and hesitant. On Britain's intervention, the two sides agreed to refer the dispute to international arbitration. Unfortunately, the conflict in the Rann of Kutch sent wrong signals to the rulers of Pakistan, who concluded that India's government and armed forces were not yet ready for war. They paid no heed to Shastri's statement, given in consultation with the army chief, General J.N. Chaudhri, that whenever India gave battle it would be 'at a time and place of its own choosing'.[2]

In August, the Pakistani government sent well-trained infiltrators into the Kashmir Valley, hoping to foment a pro-Pakistan uprising there and thus create conditions for its military intervention. Taking into account the seriousness of this Pakistan-backed infiltration, Shastri ordered the army to cross the ceasefire line and seal the passes through which the infiltrators were coming and to occupy such strategic posts as Kargil, Uri and Haji Pir. Also, unlike in 1962, the entire country rallied behind the government.

In response, on 1 September, Pakistan launched a massive tank and infantry attack in the Chhamb sector in the south-west of Jammu and Kashmir, threatening India's only road link with Kashmir. Shastri immediately ordered the Indian army to not only defend Kashmir but also to move across the border into Pakistan towards Lahore and Sialkot. Thus, the two countries were involved in war, though an undeclared one. The US and Britain immediately cut off arms, food and other supplies to both countries. China declared India to be an aggressor and made threatening noises. However, the Soviet Union, sympathetic to India, discouraged China from going to Pakistan's aid.

Under pressure from the UN Security Council, both combatants agreed to a ceasefire which came into effect on 23 September. The war was inconclusive, with both sides believing that they had won significant victories and inflicted heavy damage on the other. The only effective result was that 'invasion by infiltration' of Kashmir had been foiled. At the same time, the three weeks of fighting had done immense damage to the economies of the two countries, apart from the loss of life and costly military equipment. Resources urgently needed for economic development had been drained; and the defence budgets of the two countries had begun to mount again.

Indians were, however, euphoric over the performance of the Indian armed forces which recovered some of their pride, prestige and self-confidence lost in the India–China war in 1962. Moreover, India as a whole emerged from the conflict politically stronger and more unified. There were also several other satisfactory aspects. The infiltrators had not succeeded in getting the support of Kashmiri people. And Indian secularism had passed its first major test since 1947–48 with flying colours: there was no communal trouble during the war; Indian Muslims had given wholehearted support to the war effort; and Muslims in the armed forces had disappointed Pakistan by fighting bravely alongside their Hindu, Sikh and Christian comrades. As a result of the war Shastri became a national hero and a dominating political figure.

Subsequent to the ceasefire agreement and under the good offices of the Soviet Union, General Ayub Khan, the President of Pakistan, and Shastri met in Tashkent in Soviet Union on 4 January

1966 and signed the Tashkent Declaration. Under this Declaration, both sides agreed to withdraw from all occupied areas and return to their pre-war August positions. In the case of India, this meant withdrawing from the strategic Haji Pir pass through which Pakistani infiltrators could again enter the Kashmir Valley and giving up other strategic gains in Kashmir. Shastri agreed to these unfavourable terms as the other option was the resumption of the mutually disastrous war; that would also have meant losing Soviet support on the Kashmir issue in the UN Security Council and in the supply of defence equipment, especially MiG planes and medium and heavy tanks.

The Tashkent Conference had a tragic consequence. Shastri, who had a history of heart trouble, died in Tashkent of a sudden heart attack on 10 January, having served as prime minister for barely nineteen months.

Shastri's death once again brought the issue of succession to the fore. This, the second succession in two years, was again smoothly accomplished, and affirmed the resilience of India's political system.

Morarji Desai was once again in the field. Kamaraj's and the Syndicate's dislike for Desai had not lessened, and they looked around for a candidate who could defeat Desai but remain under their shadow. Their choice fell on Indira Gandhi: she was Nehru's daughter, had an all-India appeal and a progressive image, and was not identified with any state, region, caste or religion. They also thought that Indira Gandhi, being inexperienced and a young woman and lacking substantial roots in the party, would be more pliable and malleable. It was Kamaraj who stage-managed her election. The contest was virtually decided when 12 out of 14 chief ministers threw their weight behind her, hoping to acquire greater power to run their states and also to cash in on her mass appeal and the Nehru name to attract the voters in the forthcoming elections.

There was no process of consensus this time as Desai insisted on a contest. He felt confident of winning because of his seniority and position in the party and especially when his opponent was, as he put it, 'this mere *chokri* (a young brat of a girl)'. A secret ballot in the Congress parliamentary party was held on 19 January 1966, and Indira Gandhi defeated Desai by 355 votes to 169. Her being a woman had been no handicap, for women had participated actively in the freedom struggle with thousands of them going to jail and several of them had held high positions in Congress, including its presidentship. After independence, too, they had occupied high offices, of governors and cabinet ministers at the Centre and in the states, including that of the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state.

Indira Gandhi: The Early Years

Indira Gandhi's government was faced with several grave problems which were long in the making but which required immediate attention and solutions. Punjab was on the boil and the Naga and Mizo areas were in rebellion. She dealt effectively with these problems by accepting the demand for Punjabi Suba and being firm with the Naga and Mizo rebels, showing willingness to negotiate with them and accepting the Naga rebels' demand for autonomy.

It was, however, the economic situation which was intractable. The economy was in recession and fast deteriorating. Industrial production and exports were declining. The rains failed for the second successive year in 1966, and the drought was more severe than in 1965, and led to galloping inflation and grave food shortages. Famine conditions prevailed in large parts of the country, especially in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh The wars of 1962 and 1965 and the Pakistan–China axis had led to a sharp rise in military expenditure and diversion of resources from planning and economic development. Budget deficits were growing, endangering the Fourth Five Year Plan. The situation required hard decisions and their firm enforcement, but the government vacillated, was slow in taking decisions and, what was even worse, tardy and ineffective in implementing them. In particular, it could not reduce its own bloated administrative expenditure which the financial situation required.

The government, however, succeeded remarkably in dealing with the drought and famine situation. The problems of procurement and distribution of foodgrains and prevention of famine deaths were handled on a war footing. There were very few famine deaths as compared to the record of millions dying in the colonial period from comparative or even lesser intensity droughts and famines. This was a major achievement for Indian democracy.

The one decisive step taken by the government to deal with the deteriorating economic situation and to bolster food imports boomeranged and proved to be the most controversial of Mrs Gandhi's early decisions. As already mentioned, Indian exports were not growing and even the existing ones were being heavily subsidized by the central exchequer. Indira Gandhi's advisers argued that this was due to the rupee being grossly overvalued. If it were devalued, there would be a greater inflow of the much-needed foreign capital. India was heavily dependent for its food security on imports of wheat from the US under the PL-480 aid programme. Also, there was an urgent need for economic aid by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), stopped during the Indo-Pak war, to be resumed. The US, the World Bank and the IMF, however, insisted on devaluation of the rupee. Consequently, the Government of India devalued the rupee by 35.5 per cent on 6 June, barely four months after Mrs Gandhi assumed power.

There were angry countrywide outbursts against the decision. All sections of political opinion opposed the step, the most voluble critics being the left groups and parties, the majority of intellectuals and Kamaraj, who also resented the fact that he was not consulted before the decision was taken. The critics within the Congress party also felt that such a controversial and unpopular decision should not have been taken in an election year. There was also widespread resentment against the government for acting under foreign pressure. The devaluation, ironically, failed in its stated objectives of increasing exports and attracting foreign capital. Nor was there a significant increase in the flow of food and other foreign aid. Many years later, in 1980, Mrs Gandhi was to confess that the devaluation 'was the wrong thing to do and it harmed us greatly'.[3]

A few months after coming to power, Mrs Gandhi took major initiatives in the field of foreign affairs. Urgently needing American wheat, financial aid and capital investment, she initially tried to build bridges with the United States, especially during her visit to Washington in March 1966. President Johnson promised to send 3.5 million tonnes of foodgrains to India under PL-480 and give $900 million in aid. But actual dispatches to India were irregular and came in small

instalments. Moreover, the President took charge of the dispatches in order to control their amount and timing on a 'tonne-by-tonne' basis and thus to ensure that 'India changed its farm policy' as also its position on Vietnam.[4] Indira Gandhi felt humiliated by this 'ship-to-mouth' approach of the United States, and refused to bow before such ham-handedness and open pressure. She also decided to get out of this vulnerable position as soon as possible. In fact, India was never again to try to come close to the US on onerous terms.

Indira Gandhi's disappointment with the US found expression in the sphere of foreign policy. She started distancing herself from that country. During her visit to Washington, in March–April 1966 she had remained silent on Vietnam. Now, in July 1966, she issued a statement deploring US bombing of North Vietnam and its capital Hanoi. In the latter part of July, in Moscow, she signed a joint statement with the Soviet Union demanding an immediate and unconditional end to the US bombing and branding US action in Vietnam as 'imperialist aggression'.

In Washington, Mrs Gandhi had agreed to the US proposal for an Indo-American Educational Foundation to be funded by PL-480 rupee funds to the extent of $300 million. She now abandoned the proposal, partially because it had been vehemently criticized by a large number of Indian intellectuals and those of leftist opinion, both inside and outside Congress, as an American effort to penetrate and control higher education and research in India.

Mrs Gandhi developed close links with Nasser of Egypt and Tito of Yugoslavia and began to stress the need for non-aligned countries to cooperate politically and economically in order to counter the danger of neo-colonialism emanating from the US and West European countries. Worried by the Soviet efforts to build bridges with Pakistan and to occupy a position of equidistance from both India and Pakistan, Mrs Gandhi assured the Soviet leaders of India's continuing friendship. She also expressed a desire to open a dialogue with China but there was no thaw in Sino-Indian relations at the time. In general, after the Washington fiasco, she followed a policy of sturdy independence in foreign affairs.

The year 1966 was one of continuous popular turmoil, of mass economic discontent and political agitations provoked by spiralling prices, food scarcity, growing unemployment, and, in general, deteriorating economic conditions. Adding to this unrest were the rising and often unfulfilled aspirations of different sections of society, especially the lower middle classes. Many were able to satisfy them but many more were not. Moreover, the capitalist pattern of development was increasing economic disparity between different social classes, strata and groups.

A wave of popular agitations—demonstrations, student strikes and riots, agitations by government servants—commenced at about the same time Mrs Gandhi was being sworn in as prime minister. These agitations often turned violent. A new feature was the bandhs which meant closure of a town, city, or entire state. Law and order often broke down as the agitating crowds clashed with lathiwielding police. Sometimes the army had to be called in. Lathi charges and police firings brought the administration into further disrepute. Teachers and other middle-class professionals such as doctors and engineers also now began to join the ranks of strikers and agitators demanding higher pay and dearness allowances to offset the sharp rise in prices. There

was growing loss of public confidence in the administration and the ruling political leadership.

Opposition political parties, especially the CPM, Socialists and Jan Sangh, took full advantage of the popular mood to continually embarrass the government and took the lead in organizing bandhs and other agitations. Some of them believed that administrative breakdown would create conditions for them to come to power through elections or through non-parliamentary, extra-constitutional means. Consequently, they often did not observe democratic boundaries or constitutional proprieties.

Jan Sangh and other communal forces also organized a fierce country wide agitation demanding a total ban on cow-slaughter, hoping to cash in on the religious feelings of many Hindus in the coming elections. But the government stood firm against the demand because of its communal character and because many of the minorities and low-caste groups among Hindus ate beef because of its low price. Mrs Gandhi told parliament: 'This is not an attack on the Government. It is an attack on our way of life, our values and the traditions which we cherished.'[5] On 7 November, a mob of hundreds of thousands, led by naked sadhus, carrying swords, spears and trishuls (tridents), virtually tried to invade Parliament House, trying to destabilize constitutional government and burning buses and cars, looting shops, attacking government buildings on the way. They also surrounded Kamaraj's house with the intent to assault him. A clash with the police occurred leading to the death of one policeman and six sadhus. Blaming the Home Minister, Gulzari Lal Nanda, for inept handling of the situation she demanded his resignation. The movement soon fizzled out and cow-slaughter became a non-issue even in the elections that followed.

The year 1966 also witnessed the beginning of the downslide of parliament as an institution. There were constant disturbances and indiscipline in parliament with some members of the Opposition showing complete disregard for parliamentary decorum and niceties. Many a time the young prime minister was not extended the courtesy in keeping with her office. She was often subjected to heckling and harassment, vicious and vulgar personal attacks, male chauvinist and sexist references and unfounded allegations. Dr Rammanohar Lohia, in particular, missed no opportunity of ridiculing her, and described her as *'goongi gudiya'* (dumb doll).

Even in the party, Indira Gandhi had to face a rather troublesome situation. For one, there was the erosion of popular support for Congress. The party had been declining, becoming dysfunctional and losing political initiative since Nehru's time. It was increasingly ridden with groupism and factional rivalries at every level, leading to the formation of dissident groups in almost every state. Mrs Gandhi's own position in the party had remained weak and insecure. On becoming the prime minister, she had not been able to form a cabinet of her own choice, having had to leave all important portfolios—Home, Defence, Finance, External Affairs, and Food—undisturbed. Kamaraj, the party president, and the Syndicate consistently tried to reassert the party organization's position vis-à-vis the prime minister, and to restrict her freedom of action in framing and implementing policies. They also did not let her have much of a say in the party's internal affairs or in the selection of candidates for the parliamentary elections. Indira Gandhi had to tolerate all this because of 1967 being an election year. Also, as a political leader, she suffered at this time from two major weaknesses: she was ineffective as a leader—her opponents

quite often succeeded in isolating her in the parliamentary party and even in the cabinet—and she lacked 'ideological moorings'.

The 1967 General Elections and State Coalitions

The fourth general elections to the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies, held in February 1967, had a radical impact on Indian politics. The run-up to the elections and the elections themselves were marked by several features.

The Congress party had exhausted its mandate and lost its character and motivation as a party of social and institutional change. There was large-scale disenchantment, especially with its top leaders, because of corruption and the lavish lifestyle of many of them. Many of the regional and local Congress bosses were perceived by the people as being devoted to loaves and fishes of office, political wheeling-dealing and factional infighting. At the same time people felt frustrated because there was no other party which could replace Congress. The Opposition parties did not raise any basic social issues during the election campaign. They campaigned mainly on the question of defeating Congress. There was, however, a great political awakening among the people; in 1967 the turnout of eligible voters was, at 61.1 per cent, the highest witnessed so far.

Congress had been declining since 1964. It now went into elections, under the leadership of the Syndicate, weakened, divided and faction ridden, with the leadership showing little awareness of the party's decline in public support and estimation. Earlier, factionalism had been confined to the states, now it also engulfed the Centre. Earlier, the central leadership moderated conflicts at the state level, so that the dissidents did not feel isolated. Now the central leadership supported the dominant groups in the states in order to secure its own position at the Centre. As pointed out by Zareer Masani, 'The result was a continuous power-struggle at all levels of Congress leadership and the rapid erosion of such party discipline, confidence and comradeship as Congress had built up during the Independence movement, and without which it could not hope to remain united.'[6]

Factionalism in Congress was fully reflected in the selection of party candidates. The ticket distribution was dominated by the Syndicate members who acted in a highly partisan manner. Nearly a thousand Congressmen, who had been denied tickets, now chose to stand against the official Congress candidates as independents or as members of new state-level dissident groups.

An important feature of the 1967 elections was the coming together of the Opposition parties; some of them formed anti-Congress fronts in some states. In other cases, they entered into a series of electoral adjustments by sharing seats and avoiding contests. Quite often, the dissident Congress parties and groups also joined this process. But the coalescing parties were in almost all cases ideologically and programmatically disparate, their only cement being the desire to defeat Congress. Lohia Socialists were the most promiscuous—they did not hesitate to join the communal Jan Sangh and the rightist Swatantra. Similarly, in many states the secular Swatantra and the communal Jan Sangh joined forces. In a few states, the Communist–right wing divide was also bridged. In Tamil Nadu, Swatantra, the CPM, the Muslim League and the chauvinist DMK were partners. The CPM and the Muslim League were allies in Kerala, as were the Jan Sangh, Akalis and CPM in Punjab.

The election results were dramatic and Congress suffered a serious setback. Though it succeeded in retaining control of the Lok Sabha—it won 284 out of 520 seats—its majority was drastically reduced from 228 in 1962 to 48. Except in West Bengal and Kerala, where the left parties gained, the beneficiaries of the Congress decline were the communal, feudal, right-wing and regional parties. Congress also lost its majority in the assemblies of eight states—Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras and Kerala. The Jan Sangh emerged as the main Opposition party in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana, Swatantra in Orissa, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, the SSP in Bihar, and the Communists in West Bengal and Kerala.

The 1967 elections revealed certain long-term trends and also had certain long-term consequences. Apart from general disenchantment with Congress because of the various factors mentioned in the previous section, defection by the rich and middle peasants from the Congress camp played a major role in the Congress debacle in the northern states.

As a result of the land reforms of the early 1950s, land ownership and social power had gradually shifted to the rich peasants. They felt that their newly acquired economic position and social status, associated with control of land, was threatened by the projected foodgrain procurement policies, the land reforms and other populist rhetoric of Congress, especially of Indira Gandhi and the Congress leftists. There was also a growing class cleavage in the countryside, and any political awakening or increase in the bargaining power of landless labour would endanger rich-peasant domination of the village. The rich peasants wanted to play a far greater, in fact, a hegemonic, role in the class alliances that Congress had forged and to get the government policies changed directly in their favour.

In South India, class and caste structure or configuration was different from that in the North and the large presence of Communists kept the rural landowners tied to Congress. Moreover, alternative rich peasant parties were non-existent. In Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, on the other hand, alternative parties in the form of the SSP, Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD), and the Akali Dal were available to act as vehicles of rich-peasant interests.

In reality, Congress was nowhere anti-rich peasant but it was so perceived in North India because of its radical rhetoric. It is also true that Congress could not agree to fully satisfy rich-peasant demands without alienating the rural poor or endangering the path of economic development and industrialization it had adopted.

The rich peasants also had the advantage of carrying with them large segments of the middle and even small peasants. They shared a common ideology of peasant proprietorship and common aspirations to own and control land. To some extent, they shared common interests in terms of the prices of agricultural products and relationship with agricultural labourers. They also belonged to the same intermediate or backward castes. The rich peasants also increasingly controlled rural vote banks and therefore the vote of the marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, having gradually displaced feudal and semi-feudal landlords from that role. They also had the necessary muscle power to prevent the agricultural labourers, the large number of them being Dalits (Scheduled Castes), from going to the polling booths.

The 1967 elections heralded the era of the greater importance of rich and middle peasants in Indian politics, their hegemony over the rural social, economic and political scene, and their dislike of Congress and Communists which persists till this day. Only a coalition of small peasants and agricultural labourers could challenge this hegemony. And this is what Indira Gandhi tried to accomplish electorally in 1971 without attacking the interests of the rich peasantry.

Coalition Governments

The 1967 elections also initiated the dual era of short-lived coalition governments and politics of defection. Though the elections broke Congress's monopoly of power in the states, Congress was replaced not by a single party in any of the states but by a multiplicity of parties and groups and independents. Coalition governments were formed in all Opposition-ruled states except Tamil Nadu. In Punjab, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, Opposition governments included Swatantra, the Jan Sangh, BKD, Socialists and the CPI. Though the CPM did not join these governments, it, too, actively supported them. Thus, these governments were ideologically heterogeneous; and the left–right or secular–communal divides were almost completely bridged in them.

Congress too formed coalition governments in some of the states where it had been reduced to a minority, allying with independents and breakaway groups from the Opposition parties.

Except the DMK government in Tamil Nadu and the Swatantraled government in Orissa, the coalition governments in all the other states, whether formed by Congress or the Opposition, proved to be highly unstable and could not stay in power for long. All the coalition governments suffered from constant tensions and internal strains because of the heterogeneity of the partners. Most often, except in West Bengal and Kerala, the continuous bargaining among the partners was not on policies but on ministerial berths, patronage, and interest groups. This also led to bloated cabinets. These governments would get formed, breakup as a result of changing loyalties of MLAs and then get re-formed again. Parties, including Congress, would topple existing governments, change partners and form new governments. In between governments, a state would sometimes undergo a period of President's Rule or even mid-term polls, which seldom changed the pattern of seats in the assembly. Thus, from the 1967 general elections to the end of 1970, Bihar had seven governments, Uttar Pradesh four, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and West Bengal three each and Kerala two governmental changes, with a total of eight spells of President's Rule in the seven states. In the toppling and fresh government formation game, small parties and independents came to play an important role.

The other important feature of the coalition governments of the period was the beginning of the politics of defection. Many of the governmental changes in the northern states were the result of defections or floor crossings by individual legislators, both party members and independents. Corrupt legislators indulged in horse-trading and freely changed sides, attracted mainly by lure of office or money. In Haryana, where the defection phenomenon was first initiated, defecting legislators began to be called *Aya Ram* and *Gaya Ram* (incoming Ram and outgoing Ram). Consequently, except in the case of the two Communist parties and the Jan Sangh, party discipline tended to breakdown. Between 1967 and 1970 nearly 800 assembly members crossed the floor,

and 155 of them were rewarded with ministerial offices.

The problem of defections was to became long term and perpetual because defectors, who changed sides and toppled governments for purely personal and often corrupt reasons, were seldom punished by the voters and were elected again and again. It was only with the passage of the anti-defection law by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1986 that a check was placed on the defection phenomenon.

Interestingly, throughout this rise and fall of many state governments, the central government remained stable despite the small majority enjoyed by the ruling party. Nor did defections take place at the Centre despite the absence of an anti-defection law. Similarly, despite at one time nearly half the states being ruled by the Opposition, the federal system continued to function more or less as before. Also, even in the states the instability of governments did not lead to the breakdown of administration.

Anti-Congressism gained ground with these elections both among the Opposition parties and a large section of the intelligentsia. Anti-Congressism as a political phenomenon is, of course, to be distinguished from opposition to Congress, which was based on differences in ideology, policies or programmes. On the other hand, anti-Congressism represented 'a weariness with Congress and a hankering after almost anything else'.[7] The anti-Congress intellectuals and the Socialists were willing to back any party from the CPM to the BKD to the Jan Sangh in order to weaken Congress. The CPM and CPI also increasingly adopted such a position. The high-priest of anti-Congressism was Rammanohar Lohia who, in the words of the political scientist Rajni Kothari, devoted himself 'to the mission of destroying the Congress monopoly of power by uniting all anti-Congress forces in the country'.[8] Lohia did succeed in polarizing the polity in 1967 along Congress versus anti-Congress lines but the results were not, and have not been, either positive or enduring.

Anti-Congressism also ignored the fact that most Opposition parties were closer to some wing or the other of Congress than to another Opposition party. The Communists and Socialists were, for example, closer to the Congress left and Swatantra to the Congress right, while the Jan Sangh was, because of its communal ideology, opposed both to Congress and other secular parties in the Opposition.

The serious Congress reverses led many commentators to predict that it was the beginning of the end of Congress domination of Indian politics. But, in fact, this was not so. Congress was still not only the largest party in the country with a majority in parliament but also the only nationwide party with a nationwide organization and following. Also, there was no cohesive Opposition, and the Opposition parties had failed to keep power in the states where Congress had become a minority. At the same time, there is no doubt that Congress would now have to look for fresh political ways of attracting people who had had enough of promises and wanted concrete results. It could no longer get support on the basis of its role in the freedom struggle or its achievements during the Nehru era; it would have to renew itself.

The 1967 elections drastically changed the balance of power inside Congress. Its dominant leadership in the form of the Syndicate received a major blow as several Syndicate stalwarts, including Kamaraj (its president), Atulya Ghosh (West Bengal) and S.K. Patil (Bombay), bit the

dust. Most of the loyal followers of the Syndicate failed to get elected to parliament and the state assemblies, leaving them in no position to control the process of government formation at the Centre as they had done in 1964 and 1966.

Paradoxically, despite the shock to Congress, Indira Gandhi's position in the party and the government was not weakened. On the contrary, it further strengthened as Kamaraj and the Syndicate, having been cut down to size, were no longer in a position to challenge her. Moreover, though not yet a popular or towering leader like Jawaharlal Nehru, she had been the star and the only all-India campaigner and vote-catcher for Congress.

Indira Gandhi's independent and strong position in the party was demonstrated by her unchallenged leadership of the Congress parliamentary party and her relative independence in the formation of her cabinet and distribution of portfolios. The only challenge to her, that from Morarji Desai, soon petered out as he shied away from a contest and, instead, bargained for a position in the cabinet as deputy prime minister. Given the party's fragile majority in parliament, Indira Gandhi agreed to Desai's demand. The designation of deputy prime minister was, however, a mere formality—it gave status but no special powers in the cabinet except those of his position as the Finance Minister.

The years 1967–69 proved to be a mere transitional stage or interregnum. The government marked time as Congress moved towards a split in 1969, which marked a new stage in Indian political development. There was, however, a major development on the left to which we will briefly turn now.

The Naxalites

The CPM had originally split from the united CPI in 1964 on grounds of differences over revolutionary politics (often equated with armed struggle) and reformist parliamentary politics. In practice, however, heeding the existing political realities, the CPM participated actively in parliamentary politics, postponing armed struggle to the day when a revolutionary situation prevailed in the country. Consequently, it participated in the 1967 elections and formed a coalition government in West Bengal with the Bangla Congress, with Jyoti Basu, the CPM leader, becoming the Home Minister. This led to a schism in the party.

A section of the party, consisting largely of its younger cadres and inspired by the Cultural Revolution then going on in China, accused the party leadership of falling prey to reformism and parliamentarianism and, therefore, of betraying the revolution. They argued that the party must instead immediately initiate armed peasant insurrections in rural areas, leading to the formation of liberated areas and the gradual extension of the armed struggle to the entire country. To implement their political line, the rebel CPM leaders launched a peasant uprising in the small Naxalbari area of northern West Bengal. The CPM leadership immediately expelled the rebel leaders, accusing them of left-wing adventurism, and used the party organization and government machinery to suppress the Naxalbari insurrection. The breakaway CPM leaders came to be known as Naxalites and were soon joined by other similar groups from the CPM in the rest of the country. The Naxalite movement drew many young people, especially college and university

students, who were dissatisfied with existing politics and angry at the prevailing social condition and were attracted by radical Naxalite slogans.

In 1969, the Communist Party Marxist-Leninist (ML) was formed under the leadership of Charu Majumdar. Similar parties and groups were formed in Andhra, Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Kerala. The CP(ML) and other Naxalite groups argued that democracy in India was a sham, the Indian state was fascist, agrarian relations in India were still basically feudal, the Indian big bourgeoisie was comprador, India was politically and economically dominated by US, British and Soviet imperialisms, Indian polity and economy were still colonial, the Indian revolution was still in its anti-imperialist, anti-feudal stage, and protracted guerrilla warfare on the Chinese model was the form revolution would take in India. The Naxalite groups got political and ideological support from the Chinese government which, however, frowned upon the CP(ML) slogan of 'China's Chairman (Mao Ze-Dong) is our Chairman'.

CPI (ML) and other Naxalite groups succeeded in organizing armed peasant bands in some rural areas and in attacking policemen and rival communists as agents of the ruling classes. The government, however, succeeded in suppressing them and limiting their influence to a few pockets in the country. Not able to face state repression, the Naxalites soon split into several splinter groups and factions. But the real reason for their failure lay in their inability to root their radicalism in Indian reality, to grasp the character of Indian society and polity as also the evolving agrarian structure and to widen their social base among the peasants and radical middle-class youth. The disavowal of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism of the 1960s and early 1970s by the post-Mao Chinese leadership in the late 1970s contributed further to the collapse of the Naxalite movement as a significant trend in Indian politics.