

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONGRESS PARTY :
A STUDY OF WEST BENGAL, 1967-72**

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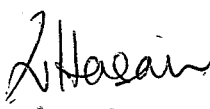
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We recommend this dissertation to be put forward before the examiners for evaluation.


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C O N T E N T S

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Contours of Politics in West Bengal in Pre-1967 and Post-1967 Years : The History of the Transformation of Congress

The Problem

An important aspect of the study of the Indian political system has been the transformation of the Congress Party. Till the mid 1960s, when the country was under a steady Congress rule, there was no formidable challenge to the party. However, rapid changes in the political scenerio soon after this, most conspicuously brought about by the defeat of the Congress Party, resulted in the emergence of new forces and a new patterns of politics. In the process the Congress Party shed off its earlier democratic and liberal norms. It is interesting to understand this transformation in terms of its far reaching impact on the political system. We do so through an examination of the Congress Party in West Bengal and the process and factors which contributed to its transformation. The present study concentrates on the period from 1967 till 1972. The Congress Party was transformed from a liberal democratic party to an increasingly authoritarian and centralised party. This

happened soon after its defeat in the general elections of 1967. The electoral reversal in 1967 was an important landmark since it was for the first time since independence that the hegemony of the Congress Party was threatened.

Our focus is on West Bengal because it is among the few states where Congress supremacy was challenged by the Left and democratic forces. Leftist ideology posed a threat to ruling class ideology. Politically it meant the erosion of support for the ruling classes and concomitant growth of revolutionary forces. Developments in subsequent years showed that in the face of 'political crisis' the ruling classes came out with open attacks on the democratic forces. This is revealed through an analysis of the transformation of the Congress Party and in the culmination of an overtly authoritarian regime of Mrs Gandhi in 1975.

This makes the period between 1967-1972 a crucial testing period for the consolidation of power and authority of the Congress Party. In the process it rode roughshod on many of the norms and conventions of parliamentary democracy. The consolidation of power in the direction of an increasingly authoritarian and gradually centralised political machine was achieved initially in West Bengal to weaken the left and popular forces and once this was achieved, it was used to crush and suppress any form of opposition to Congress, more particularly to Mrs Gandhi, which became synonymous with the

party in the course of this authoritarian transformation. Subsequently, the tactics and the method of operation of the Congress Party also changed. It changed from the path of legitimate parliamentary politics to a more marked semi-fascist rule of repression and at times annihilation.

An examination and explanation of these developments is difficult because of the dearth of literature available. More often than not the problem is insufficiently stated and inadequately explained in academic writings. Shankar Ghosh's 'The Disinherited State', Ranajit Ray's 'The Agony of West Bengal', Ashok Mitra's 'Calcutta Diary', 'The Hoodlum Years', and Sajal Basu's 'West Bengal, the Violent Years', are all interesting though essentially journalistic writings on West Bengal which give an exhaustive account of the state politics during the period under study. However, they provide almost no account of the transformation of the Congress Party, although this has been attempted to some extent by Ashok Mitra and Sajal Basu. This makes our study almost entirely dependent on the facts and information available from newspapers, magazines and journals of the contemporary period and party papers and on interviews with political leaders.

However the most vexing problem pertains to the growing contradictions between the theories of democracy and 'socialism' and practice of economic and political concentration which is a necessary part of the strategy of the ruling class to keep them in power. This is what David Selbourne

has called in another context, 'The politics of illusion'. His comment that "For an analysis of India in Indian context, it is necessary to refer to matters of ideology, theory and practice of the politics of Indian illusion",¹ is extremely relevant for our understanding of the transformation of the Congress Party. The Congress Party has played on this 'democratic illusion' to consolidate its authoritarian rule. This tendency has been particularly helpful in Mrs Gandhi's attempt to build her authority behind the seemingly radical posture, of socialism and 'garibi hatao'. Paradoxically, as Ajit Roy argues, these symbols strengthened the tendencies towards authoritarianism helping at the same time in popular mobilisation.²

Some significant characteristics of the transformation of the Congress Party were:

- (1) Since the Congress Party in its struggle against the opposition forces did not raise any clear ideological issues, it was easier to consolidate the authoritarian rule by making easy compromises, by playing off the rival elements on the one hand, and by tightening the repressive measures against the democratic and left forces on the other hand.

1 David Selbourne, An Eye to India - The Unmasking of a Tyranny, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 79.

2 Ajit Roy, Economics and Politics of Garibi Hatao, Calcutta: Naya Prakash, 1973. See the Preface.

- (ii) In view of growing threat from the left and democratic forces, particularly in West Bengal, it increasingly counted on the support of mixed strata of the society, especially the backward and retrograde sections of petty-bourgeoisie and the lumpen proletariats whose lack of clear class consciousness and economic vulnerability make them an easy prey to the machinations of the ruling classes. This changed the social composition of the party.
- (iii) Also there was growing mobilisation of the state apparatus to serve partisan ends. In West Bengal this close collusion between the Congress Party and the state machinery was marked in the perpetuation of rule of terror.

From Consensus Party to Autocratic Regime : A Congress History

We have studied the question of Congress Party's transformation from a broadly Marxist frame. There is another equally important liberal school of thought, mainly represented in the writings of Rajni Kothari, W. Morris Jones, Myron Weiner, who have defined Indian political system as 'one party dominant system'³ functioning under Congress dominance. The basic arguments of this school are given below.

3 See Rajni Kothari, Politics in India, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970; W.H. Morris Jones, Government and Politics of India, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1971; Myron Weiner, Party Building in a New Nation : The Indian National Congress, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967.

The Congress Party of India is by far the largest and one of the most successful political parties functioning in the competitive political system of the new nations of the underdeveloped world. Few other national movements have been so successfully transformed into a political party. The legacy of the historic struggle of the Indian people against British imperialism fought under the Congress banner and its long association with the nation's government and administration even after many years of achieving independence, have almost made it synonymous with the term 'government'. The Congress Party has always been a big umbrella. Under its hegemony the national movement became a multi-class mass movement united under a common programme of fighting imperialism. The ideological question was never so great as at the time of fighting the common enemy and agreeing upon a common programme. It was under such historic conditions that Indian National Congress (INC) became the leading group in the coalition - united and led the struggle under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, but also carried with it the working class and peasantry. After independence it transformed itself into the dominant party of the nation, since it was recognised that it was the chief party representing a historic consensus and enjoying a continual basis of support and trust.⁴

⁴ Rajni Kothari, "Congress System in India", in Asian Survey, December 1964, pp. 1161-1173.

This is the supporting premise of the consensus model of one party dominant system developed by Kothari which he has clarified in his two major works, 'Politics in India' (1970), and 'Caste in Indian Politics' (1970). An important feature of this model is the emergence of opposition from within the ruling party, which shows that political dissent has been 'a function of fragmentation of the political centre of society rather than a projection of autonomous interest in social and economic spheres'.⁵

The central implication of this is the development of the idea of consensus. Since Congress captured power as a movement for independence and reform and not as a political party and since it encompassed the major sections and interests of society, 'it acquired the stamp of legitimacy and came to represent a historical consensus'.⁶ This has consequently led to a blurring of distinction between government and the opposition and thereby contributed to a sharing of outlook between the opposition and the ruling party due to their 'common socialisation in the past'.⁷

Thus the development of the 'consensus model' is synonymous with the perpetuation of one party dominance.

5 Rajni Kothari, Politics in India, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970, p. 216.

6 Asian Survey, op. cit.

7 Rajni Kothari, Politics in India, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970, p. 161.

The essence of the system is that while it does not deny the role of opposition in the political system, the opposition groups function only on the 'margin of pressure'. The process of internal corrective through factionalism is another important factor of one party dominance. As Paul Brass remarked, 'it provides integration without endangering stability in the long run'. "Both the ideas of an in-built corrective through factionalism within the ruling party and the idea of a latent threat from outside the margin of pressure are necessary parts of one party dominant system."⁸ In short, it is the consensus system which works through the institution of a party of consensus.

The political developments following the fourth general elections however brought out certain interesting changes. For the first time it broke with the monopoly of power of the Congress Party and brought out the inner strains and contradictions of a 'hotch-potch' dominant party which had concealed many of its operational weaknesses under the hallowed leadership of Nehru. Of the sixteen states of the Union that went to the polls in February 1967, the Congress lost majority in eight and failed to form government in seven of them. For the first time the country entered into an era of competitive politics with an enormous rise and fall of

⁸ Rajni Kothari, "Congress System in India", in Asian Survey, December 1964.

coalitions. With the breaking of the 'Congress system' emerged a number of non-Congress parties, varying significantly between extreme right to extreme left, who became united mainly on the basis of providing an alternative to the Congress, despite their political and ideological differences.

The election reversal of 1967 revealed the shortcomings of the consensus model, as also the growing contradictions in the Congress Party. These became more pronounced after the defeat of the ruling party.

The crisis of the Congress system was a crisis of legitimacy -- a crisis in the whole system of consensus on which was based the entire model of one party dominance. Indian National Congress had always been a party of widest possible diversities. Still the fact that the party had an unquestioned sway over the political life of the nation was due to the great balancing force, Pandit Nehru, whose unchallengeable charisma and authority in the party as well as in the nation held the groups together.⁹ Tensions and competitions in the Congress Party which lay dormant in the entire Nehru era accentuated after his death, so much so that the central leadership was no longer in a position to perform its traditional function of mediation of divisions. The dispute between the government and organisation of the party relating

9 Stanley A. Kochanek, Congress Party of India - The Dynamics of One Party Dominance, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 407.

to the distribution of power between the leadership of the party and government had already started in Nehru's life time. The succession crisis of 1964, the coming into power of Mrs Gandhi in 1966 and the subsequent election defeat of the Congress in 1967 only demonstrated the gradual process of fragmentation of authority which had already begun.

Thus, 1967 is important in the history of Congress transformation because it marks the emergence of a new era of Indian politics - an era of decisive break with Congress hegemony coupled with the beginning of the party competition. Along with this the internal conflicts and factional intrigues within the Congress reached such heights that the Congress was split in 1969. But side by side with this fragmentation of authority and factionalism in Congress, one of the most significant developments since 1967 was the gradual consolidation of personal authority. So long the political crisis of the Congress Party did not aggravate to threaten its hegemony, the liberal bourgeois leadership of Nehru functioned within a broad democratic frame.

But with Mrs Gandhi started a new phase of authoritarianism and centralised control as the democratic framework was found inadequate. The Congress Party under her leadership created a new political process the elements of which became more pronounced after the Congress split in 1969. The 'New Congress' which she created especially after the split was exactly what Kochanek called 'more highly centralised and

personalised and less institutional than Nehru.¹⁰ The working of this political process required more political tact and manoeuvring because of the breakdown of the institutions which built a consensus among different state leaders, who in turn were linked with the electorate below them. After the 1969 split, this link of the central authority, namely the prime minister, with the electorate via these institutions snapped. As a result Mrs Gandhi had to appeal directly to the people, for which she had to resort to populist slogans to win the support of the people and also to counter the opposition, especially the left opposition against her, at the same time launching an attack on the left and radical forces. This strategy worked on well till she regained power in 1971. This is why 1967 is meaningful in understanding the transformation of the Congress Party from a consensual party to an authoritarian and autocratic regime. Mrs Gandhi's leadership and 1969 split are however the most important landmarks in this disintegration.

It is not very meaningful to consider 1971 to be the restoration of the Congress dominance again. Rather it can be called the beginning of the crisis which had started earlier and saw its maturation in the years that followed - a crisis that was generated as the Congress moved from its goal of

10 Henry C. Hart (ed.), Indira Gandhi's India - A Political System Reappraised, Boulder: Westview Press, 1976; see Kochanek's article "Mrs Gandhi's New Congress", p. 93.

'nation building' and tilted towards 'regime building' under Mrs Gandhi. But granting the maturity of democratic processes in India, the task of building a centralised and personalised regime were difficult. The crisis of the Congress Party further matured in the midst of a severe economic crisis. The radical rhetorics Mrs Gandhi used to win a political battle also collapsed. The Congress Party took off its democratic mask and came out openly against democratic forces particularly in West Bengal. An overtly authoritarian regime took root as Mrs Gandhi became increasingly intolerant of dissidence and resorted to coercive measures to control them.

West Bengal's Society and Politics

Compared with the political process in the all India domain, the politics of West Bengal is distinct. Its unique geographical location which has created one of the world's richest and largest and dynamic deltaic region, as much as its rich tradition and history has given the state a specificity of its own. Not only this, the magnitude of exploitation, economic, social and political and the manifold play of social forces has fostered radical undercurrent that is an important element in the political development of West Bengal. As Marcus Franda puts it, "West Bengal has always had a reputation of cultural unorthodoxy, social protest and

political radicalism...."¹¹

West Bengal has always occupied a prominent place in national politics. Bengal was the first victim of British rule, its richness in commercial assets made it the seat of colonial exploitation. Initially through their policy of organised loot and plunders and thereafter seizing the state power the Britishers revived West Bengal's traditional indigenous industries and converted it into an agricultural state. And then through the introduction of permanent settlement the right to permanent occupation of land was transferred from the cultivating peasants to another new class of urban elites who had rentier interest in land. The class which prospered from the new system formed the nucleus of the new collaborationist class - the bhadralok. Their tradition of literacy and mastery of English fetched them state employment, their vital role in the state administration however gradually increased their appetite for power. But they failed ultimately to pose a radical challenge to British rule as their essentially 'middle class' position compromised their politics to liberal constitutionalism. In the latter half of the 19th century leading to the formation of the Indian National Congress was the period when Bengali 'bhadralok' were steeped in liberal

¹¹ M. Franda Paul Brass (ed.), Radical Politics in South Asia, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973; see Ch. 3, p. 183.

constitutional politics. Their narrow social base and absence of any connections with the peasantry made them inherently weak and ineffective as a political force.

However, the Bengali middle classes soon became frustrated with constitutional politics and turned first to extremism. This period in the early 20th century also saw the rise of popular forces and the Bengali middle classes did make some efforts to join them in the Swadeshi period. It marked a watershed in Bengali politics. "It signalled a triumph in the national movement, but also revealed the weakness of a class caught in a thoroughly contradictory position half way between colonial power above and popular masses below...."¹²

Partition struggle virtually broke with the traditional bhadralok politics of constitutional petitions bringing into prominence the forces of extremism and revolutionary terrorism, though both equally elitist. Nonetheless it imparted a radical colour to Bengali politics, till Gandhi arrived on the political scene to mobilise the masses through his slogan of 'non-violence'. Gandhi's strategy reflected the sagacity of the Congress Party who could foresee that an uncompromising liberation struggle would endanger its own

¹² Robin Blackburn (ed.), Explosion in a Subcontinent, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1975; see Premn Addy and Itne Azad's article on "Politics and Society in Bengal", p. 117; see also Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1905-8, Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977.

position, since any solution on revolutionary lines would be a class solution.

1930s again was a period of radical challenges to the national movement. Particularly in Bengal this radicalisation assumed mass proportions and reflected the restive attitude of workers and peasants through mass scale general strike in jute mills and non-payment of rents. The Communist Party rightfully took the advantage of this to mobilise and strengthen its organisation and sided with Congress due to its Popular Front Strategy, which allowed it to take the advantages of radicalism. However, its opposition to the great national upsurge of 1942 and participation in an ill-prepared Tebhaga peasant uprising in 1946 brought forth its temporary eclipse, thus enabling Congress Government to take over power in West Bengal after independence.

With its legacy in the national history the radical element in West Bengal politics has been ever present. Its lukewarm support for constitutionalism coupled with the complex play of socio-political forces, its dynamism and creative currents of political and social thinking, the existence of a relatively organised working class and peasantry and the serious strains of partition and growing impoverishment of the economy especially after independence and of course the Communists efforts to organise the exploited sections of the society, were all important factors

which worked together behind a Communist stronghold in the state. Particularly after the Communist Party split in 1964, CPI(M) increased its influence - making the state a 'fortress of leftism'. Popularity of the left increased with the growing tension in agriculture arising from land hunger and rural disparity and the slackness of the economy provided fertile ground for protest and political activism.

West Bengal had always occupied a prominent place in the industrialisation of the Indian economy. In Bengal were situated the traditional industries like jute, textile, engineering, tea and coal. Since independence, however, its percentage of share in the total industrial production in India has steadily decreased. And during the 1960s when economic stagnation had taken over the whole of India the condition of this state had further deteriorated. Especially since the mid 1960s a further worsening of the economic situation had greatly influenced its political process. It can be said that the political crisis of the Congress Party in 1967 along with the rise of militant forces also reflected the all round economic crisis of the Indian capitalist class. The challenge to bourgeois hegemony from the left also reflected the organic crisis of the capitalists in Bengal. Since their survival and expansion depended on a 'stable political rule' which the hegemonic role of the Congress Party provided, they wanted to re-establish its hegemony. But as the left grew strong that had to be crushed and repressed.

Background of 1967 Elections

Until 1966 West Bengal experienced stable Congress rule, although the relations with the Centre were never free from discord. B.C. Roy's personality, his mass appeal and administrative ability made him the most successful of the Chief Ministers in West Bengal in pre-1967 period. With his death in 1962 the greatest cementing force in the state Congress was lost. P.C. Sen, who succeeded him, was a poor substitute to Roy. The support which he had been able to muster of the two different groups of the state Congress and the rapport he had been able to establish between the opposition parties over the years had ended with his death. And differences started developing between the legislative and organisational wings of the Congress Party as Ajoy Mukherjee took over the presidency of the organisational wing of the State Congress after 1963, while P.C. Sen led the legislative wing. The differences matured over the years and culminated in the formation of Bangla Congress by Ajoy Mukherjee in 1966.

After the Sino-Indian war in 1962 the Marxists were spurred into an active role in West Bengal. The Indo-Pak war in 1965 led to a minor combing operation throughout the country. Especially in West Bengal the measures were more stringent since it was a border state. This estranged a large section of Muslims on whose vote Congress relied greatly.

There were certain other internal developments which were heightened one year before the fourth general election. In West Bengal 1966 was a year of exceptional stress and strain. The economic stagnation since 1965 particularly affected West Bengal especially the engineering industry. Unemployment was on the increase. This had important repercussions on politics. It gave a spurt to the radicalisation of the trade unions and of the middle classes. It had been the worst year for food production. The hue and cry against food and fuel shortage led to widespread bandhs, protests and violent outbursts. The Congress Government tried to suppress the popular revolt by force by bringing in police and by putting the opposition leaders in jail. As a result, distrust in Congress Government grew.

Opposition leaders particularly the Marxists tried to turn the popular discontent to their advantage. The Congress history of nonperformance and misrule inspired and encouraged the opposition to work together to defeat Congress in the ensuing election.

Two anti-Congress fronts came into being to fight Congress in the 1967 elections - United Left Front headed by CPI(M) with SSP, PSP, SUC, Workers Party, Forward Bloc (Marxist) etc. and Progressive United Left Front with CPI, Bangla Congress, Forward Bloc, Gorkha League, Lok Sevak

Sangh etc. Afterwards both the groups merged into one front known as United Democratic Front under popular pressure and took over the reins of first non-Congress ministry in West Bengal under the Chief Ministership of Ajoy Mukherjee.

1967 Election and an Account of
Political Developments till 1972

1967 elections were a turning point not only in the political life of West Bengal but also in the history of Indian politics. On the all India plane Congress hegemony was challenged for the first time. Its important political repercussion was not only the change which the political system underwent from a dominant one party system, but also a gradual transformation of the Congress Party in the face of growing challenges to its authority. The political process in West Bengal in the years 1967-72 provides a demonstration of this transformation that the present study attempts to bring out.

The first non-Congress ministry in West Bengal took office in March 1967. Subsequently in four elections in six years (1967-72), five ministries with two abortive experiments with Congress supported Progressive Democratic Front (PDF) minority ministry of 1971, the PDF-Congress coalition ministry of 1967-68 and the three long spells of President's rule, are clear demonstrations of crisis, growing tensions and instability in the state.

The history of United Front in West Bengal will perhaps be insignificant in terms of its economic achievements. But then it was significant in revealing an interesting phase of Indian politics. It showed in clear terms the democratic pretensions of the ruling classes which crumbled with the very momentum of popular revolt against it.

The first handy weapon against the United Front government was the systematic campaign by the Centre against the growing deterioration of 'law and order' in the state. This was necessitated in view of the United Front Government's support to the militant struggles of the working class, recognising 'gherao' as a legitimate working class weapon and the government's refusal to place police at the disposal of the employers. Of course such changes in government policy attained tremendous popularity among the working class but it also stiffened the forces of reaction. Despite crisis in the economic front people supported the ministry overwhelmingly as became clear from the result of 1969 election. Initially Congress Party's systematic campaign to discredit the state government started at criticising the government openly, and then to encourage officials and others to defy state authority.

The next step was its 'operation topple' in which the Congress even used the Governor to serve the partisan role, thus raising questions regarding the constitutionality



of his powers. The United Front Government ultimately fell victim of this when the minority ministry of P.C. Ghosh supported by Congress was sworn in November 1967. And once this experiment also failed, the Centre made a declaration of President's rule in the state.

P.C. Ghosh's minority ministry and the long period of President's rule thereafter was a continuing era of 'reign of terror' in West Bengal. 'Intimidation, terrorism, indiscriminate arrests, beating up, harassment by searching and destruction' became the norm of the ruling party's power game.¹³ As Mohit Sen observed that at the heart of the present situation was the fact that the Congress leadership could no longer rule in its old way. Its faith and confidence in its ability to manuvre its class aims exclusively through the mechanism and structure of parliamentary democracy was broken entirely. It was a turning point in Indian history when extra-parliamentary or anti-parliamentary actions was going increasingly to be the form of Congress rule.¹⁴

The mid-term election brought back the left to power with increasing support. But unfortunately the ministry which was sworn in March 1969 fell victim of inner

13 See Ajoy Dasgupta's article "Police Terror in West Bengal", in New Age, 17 December 1967.

14 See Mohit Sen's article "United Front in Perspective", in Mainstream, 23 December 1967.



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contradictions due to the fact that the second leftist UF proved to be an uneasy coalition. The Centre acted timely to take this opportunity to topple the ministry, and once again the agony of the state increased with the imposition of President's rule in March 1970. The long spell of President's rule in the state was virtually a 'Congress rule in disguise', which helped it in organising attacks on the left and popular forces. It was played well to alienate other partners of the UF from the CPI(M).

Mrs Gandhi declared election in 1971 being more confident of her following among the opposition who were swayed away by her sudden progressive image, especially after the Congress split in 1969 and her implementation of the policy of bank nationalisation. By an unmistakable twist of her policy of 'garibi hatao', 1971 election brought her back that majority she needed to consolidate her authority.

In West Bengal however the situation was tricky again with none of the parties having a clear majority to form a ministry. The Congress at this stage utilised the popular image of Mrs Gandhi and indecisive attitude of the EPC (i.e. eight party combine, comprising of CPI, FB, SUC, RSP, SSP, PSP (West Bengal), Bolshevik Party and RCPI) and the Bangla Congress Front i.e. B.C., Socialist Party (breakaway from SSP) and PSP (breakaway from PSP, WB) could

manage to procure the entire anti CPI(M) vote. However, Ajoy Mukherjee's minority ministry in 1971 could not last for more than two months and a third spell of President's rule was imposed. A more positive Central presence became inevitable because of Bangladesh war and its impact on the economy and security of West Bengal.

1972 elections in the state constitute a landmark not for the increasing trend in favour of the Congress as for the maturation of a dangerous and unprecedented trend in the structure of Congress politics that ruled out any further legitimacy of the ideal of parliamentary democracy. Paradoxically, the ruling party came at this stage to dread even the ballot box. That the election was rigged by the Congress Party to a large extent was borne clearly in diffused writings about that event. Not only this, the scale of violence used by the Congress to capture state power, terrorising of voters, booth capturing and tampering of electoral rolls, demonstrated in clear terms a complete subversion of democracy to suit ruling party's interest and exposed its authoritarian nature. Butchery of democracy in West Bengal is a part of the attack on the democracy in India. This is the road towards authoritarianism.

The trend towards authoritarianism of the Congress Party, or indeed more specifically its maturation into a centralised and institutionalised autocracy of Mrs Gandhi,

'is just a symptom, the concentrated expression of long tendencies'.¹⁵ Its discordant structure, ambiguity and contradictions in its ideology and the political crisis have all worked upon the process of evolution and its final culmination. And the more the 'crisis' deepened, the greater was the need to throw away the democratic mask. The case of West Bengal is particularly important because here the operation and instigation of open terror against the Marxists also revealed the development of a definite trend towards semi-fascism. As Biplab Dasupta says, "terror plus propaganda plus grandiose projects - the old fascist formula - is now being tried on the people of West Bengal."¹⁶ It indicates the extent to which the ruling classes can go in order to place itself in power.

We propose to undertake the study of the transformation of the Congress Party under the following chapters apart from the introduction where we have attempted a brief outline of politics in West Bengal relating it to the question of transformation:

15 Arun Shourie, Symptoms of Fascism, New Delhi: Vikas, 1978, p. 13.

16 See Biplab Dasgupta's article "West Bengal Today", in Socialist Scientist, vol. 1, no. 8, March 1973, p. 15.

- Chapter II - Congress Party and the State Apparatus
- Chapter III - The Ideology and Operation of Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress in West Bengal
- Chapter IV - Class Struggles in the Industries and Trade Unions
- Chapter V - Conclusion.

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CHAPTER II

CONGRESS PARTY AND THE STATE APPARATUS

This chapter broadly deals with the relationship between the Congress Party and the state apparatus that is, the police, military and para military forces, bureaucracy and the legislature. In this respect we have particularly concentrated on their repressive role. The growth and mobilisation of the state apparatus at the behest of the Congress Party for carrying on widespread repression in West Bengal is an important element in the transformation of the Congress Party from a relatively democratic party to an authoritarian one. A liberal democracy works with a tacit neutrality of its state institutions, whereby it maintains a certain degree of rule of law. Authoritarianism overturns this balance since it brings with it an endemic political crisis and a loss of legitimacy in the existing system. Its reliance on the state apparatus, particularly the repressive state apparatus is great at this stage. The political processes of West Bengal from 1967 to 1972 revealed this fact.

The Congress Party's rise to authoritarianism in the face of challenges from the left and popular forces in West Bengal in 1967 could be explained as a response to the

political crisis of the ruling party. Unlike in other parts of India it was particularly marked in West Bengal. This was due to the fact that since the mid 1960s in West Bengal, the urban middle classes, workers and peasants under the leadership of the left parties supported militant mass movements which often transcended the bounds of parliamentary democracy. The Left had two tendencies - one of them, the organised and established parliamentary left wanted to channelise mass movements into an electoral victory of the left - leading to the formation of left led United Front governments. The other tendency came out with a call for seizure of state power by means of armed struggle. The latter tendency, however, soon turned into peasant and urban terrorism. However, both these trends posed a challenge to the rule of the dominant classes whereby the very structure of their domination was undermined. The left movement instilled great fear and anxiety into the bourgeoisie demonstrated subsequently ⁱⁿ the attacks on the left and democratic forces of the state at the bidding of the Congress Party. In this chapter we have tried to focus on the organised nature of state repression which was essentially carried on by the Congress Party in close collusion with the state machinery. The chapter will discuss the following aspects:

- (1) The growth of the state apparatus
- (2) Enactment of legislations
- (3) Practice of violence and rigging in elections.

The Growth of State Apparatus

The growth of the state apparatus during the period under study is evident in the rise of the state's military, para-military and police forces. In this section we shall mainly concentrate on the nature of repression unleashed by these forces. The ferocity of such attacks can be seen from numerous incidents that took place in Calcutta and also in different parts of West Bengal. They involved military combing operations, brutal attacks by the CRP, indiscriminate arrests, torture and killings by the CRP and police and also physical liquidation of the leaders and cadres of the democratic movements, especially of the Left.¹ Since the imposition of President's rule in the state in 1970, however, forces of repression had come down more systematically. In the name of improving the 'law and order situation', the long spell of President's rule from March 1970 onward, except for the two months Ajoy Mukherjee's minority ministry from April 1971 to June 1971 had further aggravated the problem by bringing into existence a free play of terror and violence. Particularly with the spread of Naxalbari movement since 1969 the Congress Party had further mobilised the entire state machinery to liquidate the leaders and organisers of the democratic movements in the name of rounding up the Naxalites. CRP and military 'combing operations' had been co-ordinated with

¹ Supplement to People's Democracy, 12 September 1971, p. 23.

such attacks.² In many areas the supporters of left were threatened and forced to leave their homes. This happened in as many as thirty-four constituencies during elections in 1972. This went with subverting elections in the state through violence and rigging to pave the ground for Congress victory.³ Trade Union members were also the victims to a large extent.

It could be noted that as the discontent of the people grew and found expression in powerful demonstration against the present regime, the repressive role of the state apparatus increased correspondingly.⁴ It could be seen from the increasing deployment of CRP in the state. It was quite obvious of Ajoy Mukherjee, the then Chief Minister, to request the Centre for the deployment of more CRP in West Bengal just before the dismissal of the second United Front Government in March 1970. Jyoti Basu, who was holding the Home portfolio stated: "Chief Minister has this done over my head

2 People's Democracy, 2 January 1972.

3 Jyoti Basu, Subversion of Parliamentary Democracy in West Bengal, Calcutta: CPI(M), p. 13.

4 Ajit Roy, Political Power in India - Nature and Trends, Calcutta: Naya Prakash, 1975, p. 75.

though I am still in the Home Department."⁵ Military officers were also independently offering help to officers of the state Home Department.⁶ Not only this, a major shake up in the police administration was ordered with frequent changes in panel of government advisors and their portfolios along with fresh reinforcement of CRP.⁷ All these were needed to tighten the forces of repression.

According to information given to the Lok Sabha, expenditure on CRP gradually increased three-fold from Rs. 13.57 crores in 1968-69 to 39.44 crores in 1973-74.⁸ It was reported that a staggering total of Rs. 46.07 crores was outstanding till March 1974 against fifteen state governments for the deployment of CRP. The highest amount of over Rs. 17.47 crores was *against* West Bengal.⁹ It is quite clear that since in West Bengal the crisis faced by the Congress was most formidable its dependence on CRP repression was also the greatest. In another report the Calcutta police was

5 Hindustan Times, 17 March 1970.

6 Ibid.

7 Free Press Journal, 20 November 1970.

8 Frontier, 19 October 1975.

9 Hindustan Standard (Calcutta), 22 November 1974.

stated to have decided to use their armed units to deal with Naxalites. It revealed that out of the total strength of 18,000 the Calcutta police had 5,500 armed personnel. In addition, two CRP battalions with a total strength of 900 men were being brought to assist the armed units of Calcutta police.¹⁰

Almost any form of democratic protest had become an impossibility during the whole period of CRP repression. On a strike call sponsored by the CPI(M) just before the dissolution of second United Front Government, at least 21 people were killed and over 100 injured in police firings and violent clashes in one day in and around Calcutta. During the year 1970-71, according to a statement made in the State Assembly, 199 persons were killed in police firings in West Bengal.¹¹ Political murders increased sharply after the fall of second United Front Government, particularly during the time of Democratic Coalition Government led by the Congress in 1971. Whereas in 1970 there were 436 political murders, in 1971 the figures went up to 1,169.¹²

With such massive mobilisation of the CRP and the armed police, torture and killing of political prisoners in

10 The Statesman (Calcutta), 29 April 1970.

11 Jugantar, 13 July 1972, quoted in Sajal Basu, West Bengal - The Violent Years, Calcutta: Prachi Publications, 1974, p. 92.

12 Jyoti Basu, Subversion of Parliamentary Democracy in West Bengal, Calcutta: CPI(M), 1972.

jails had assumed serious proportions. The main object of CRP was to get rid of Naxalites. Hundreds and thousands of innocent citizens and left-party cadres had been massacred in jails and often openly by the police, CRP and Congress hoodlums on this pretext.¹³

The most glaring example of such violence had been the massacre at Baranagar and Cossipore, the two industrial suburbs of Calcutta on the 12th and 13th of April 1971. Significantly, this incident took place when the state was under President's rule. It was a planned and organised attack not only on Naxalites, but also on CPI(M) leftists as well as many innocent citizens. Though the Congress leaders justified it as their drive against the Naxalites, it bore a clear proof of how "the fascist thugs of the Congress ruling class had been responsible for the murder of 150 citizens within 48 hours and how the personal representative of Mrs Gandhi in Bengal, Mr Siddharta Sankar Ray had heaved a sigh of relief at what he called the 'clearing out of Naxalites'."¹⁴ A few hundred young armed men hounded out suspected Naxalites from their hideouts, butchered them and then carried their bodies in cart loads to be thrown into

13 Association For the Protection of Democratic Rights (West Bengal), Bharatia Ganatantra Swaroop (Bengali), Calcutta: APDR, 1977; see Part II, Chapters 5-7, in particular pp. 22-29 and 33-49.

14 T. Nagi Reddy, India Mortgaged, Anantapuram (A.P.): T. Nagi Reddy Memorial Trust, 1978, p. 366.

Hoogly flowing past Cossipore" - said the report of an important newspaper about the incident.¹⁵ Even the family members of the so-called Naxalites were not spared and were murdered ruthlessly with their faces rubbed black with tar so that they could not be recognised. Many others had been sprinkled petrol on them and were burnt alive. It was even more strange that police maintained a conspicuous silence and were nowhere around during the gruesome killings, despite their being stationed only a few furlongs away from the rampage scene. That proved beyond doubt the tacit collusion between the Congress Party and the state machinery. On the contrary, by defining the killers as 'agitated' and by expressing doubts whether the persons killed were peaceful citizens, the government had markedly exposed its calculated strategy.¹⁶ Later on, in an interview, Mr Siddharta Sankar Ray, the Union Minister in charge of West Bengal stated: "It was an expression of mass anger which had accumulated over a period".¹⁷ This clearly contradicted his previous statement where he described the operation as 'clearing out of Naxalites'. The entire incident brought out clearly the

15 Blitz, 21 August 1971, quoted in Nagi Reddy, *ibid.*, p. 163.

16 APDR, Bharatiya Ganatantrik Swaroop, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

17 Quoted in T. Nagi Reddy, India Mortgaged, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

sheer authoritarian tactics of the ruling classes to liquidate the opposition through the repressive state machinery together with its organised strong arm brigades 'working on the civil-political plane but under direct guidance and protection of the state repressive machinery',¹⁸

Against the background of the government supported violence an even more systematic offensive was launched against CPI(M) led trade unions.¹⁹ Large scale use of terror, official and semi-official threat of administrative action against the absentees and striking employees and deployment of Congress squads under police protection were all combined in destroying the CPI(M) bases.²⁰ It was during the President's rule in 1970 that about 25,000 armed police and CRP were despatched to crush the strike of 60,000 Durgapur workers protesting against the arrest of their leaders. Not only they beat and tortured the workers including their families but also stopped food and milk supplies to them.²¹ The police had also arrested various trade union leaders and workers on false charges.

18 Biren Roy and Subodh Das Gupta (ed.), A Marxist View of Indian Politics, 1967-1972, Calcutta: Mudranee, 1974, p. 176.

19 Economic and Political Weekly, "Government Supported Terror", 6 November 1971.

20 Ibid.

21 People's Democracy, 17 January 1971.

Whereas in the towns and cities the main attempts of the police had been to terrorise the democratic elements in society and to paralyse the popular movements, in the villages they acted as armed agents of jobedars. Their offensive was largely directed against the poor and landless peasants who had benefited from the United Front Government's progressive land reform policies, especially the distribution of vested lands amongst the landless.

In addition, killing of political prisoners in jails and torture in police custody testified to the horrors of police repression. As per the official estimate given in different newspapers, about 88 persons were killed in different jails in West Bengal and Bihar during the period December 1970 and June 1972.²²

According to a lengthy document on the conditions of political prisoners in West Bengal jails, prepared by Amnesty International in 1974, the number of political prisoners held in West Bengal between 1970 and 1974 ranged between 15,000 and 20,000.²³ Even inside jails they were not given the status of political prisoners and were forced to live under subhuman conditions. The Amnesty International raised the issue of large scale detention of political prisoners in West Bengal, where most of the prisoners were being held without trial. In

22 Quoted by Ajit Roy, from different newspapers, op. cit., p. 93.

23 Ibid., p. 92.

its report, it referred to the allegations of torture of prisoners which was frequently applied during police interrogation. It included severe beatings "to the extent of fractured limbs, prisoners being hung upside down and pins and nails being inserted into their nails and other sensitive organs of the body including genitals. In a number of cases the use of modern electric shock methods was reported and prisoners were also allegedly burnt with cigarettes extinguished on their skin. The report also referred to the allegations of torture of women prisoners in Lal Bazar.²⁴

Legislations of the Congress Government

Not only a tacit collaboration existed between the Congress Party and the entire repressive apparatus of the state, but also an attempt was made by the ruling party to give a legal sanction to their rule of terror. This came about through a sudden spurt of legislations to launch attacks on the lives and liberties of the people. This had reached menacing proportions in the period under discussion. As one observer had noted: "The most pernicious instrument for bringing about a police raj in the country, however, has

²⁴ Portions of the report quoted from "Amnesty International's Document on the Conditions of Political Prisoners in West Bengal Jails", Economic and Political Weekly, 21 September 1974. It further quotes while reporting on the torture of women prisoners: "When failing to supply the wanted information, they were stripped naked, burned with cigarettes on all parts of the body and in some cases iron rulers were inserted into the rectum and vagina."

been the enactment of draconian laws for detention without trial, the latest piece of legislation of this genre being the maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), 1971.²⁵

It is however interesting to note that attack on the civil liberties of the people had started from the very inception of the Constitution in 1950. During that time the whole of India was brought under 'Preventive Detention Act', which continued till 1969. Barring the gap of one year in between, in November 1970, West Bengal was brought under 'Prevention of Violent Activities Act' by the Congress Government to round up the alleged Naxalites and to crush the democratic movement in West Bengal. Then after the Bangladesh war, the Congress Government seized the opportunity to impose 'Maintenance of Internal Security Act' (MISA) in May and 'Defence of India Act' in December 1971. Of all these, MISA had posed the most formidable threat to civil liberties. Though at the time of introducing the Bill in the Parliament, the then Minister of State for Home had assured the necessity of the law in the context of Bangladesh crisis, it was clear enough at the time of discussion of MISA that it would be a new weapon more for use against the democratic struggles and movements of the masses and the working people than for the internal security, especially due to the growing left influence in West Bengal.

25 Ajit Roy, op. cit., p. 82.

All these legislations, particularly MISA, strengthened the administration's powers to attack civil liberties systematically and regularly and to detain political prisoners without trial. Arrest, detention and liquidation of thousands of trade union leaders and activists and many more workers owing sympathies to the CPI(M) and CPI(ML) took place under these laws.

According to a government report submitted in Parliament, the number of people detained under MISA between July 1971 and May 1972 in West Bengal was 4,109, which was perhaps the largest in the whole of India.²⁶

Not satisfied with the strong provisions of MISA the Congress Government had also planned the amendment of the 'Criminal Law Amendment Act' to enable the government to ban parties and organisations. Obviously the motive behind this was to attack the militant organisations of the working class and other working people. The use of 'Essential Services Maintenance Act' was also another weapon to impose ban^{on} strikes to disrupt the trade union struggle of the working class.²⁷ Arrest warrants were being indiscriminately issued against thousands of people in West Bengal. Of these many were actually arrested on false charges. And as soon as they were released on bail, the government had prepared

26 Quoted in Bharatiya Ganatantrik Swaroop, op. cit., p. 5, from The Statesman (Calcutta), 26 July 1973.

27 Supplement to People's Democracy, 2 September 1971, p. 32.

cases to rearrest them under one or the other preventive detention acts like MISA and Prevention of violent activities. All these bore a clear proof as to how direct repression of the state machinery was further bolstered through legislative enactments violating all normal bourgeois legal norms.

Practice of Violence and Rigging in Elections

The nature of attack on the parliamentary democracy and the system of elections was an important contributory factor towards the consolidation of authoritarianism of the Congress Party. Objectively the need for such operations could be explained in the presence of large scale violence in which the Congress Party indulged in West Bengal on the one hand, and also the urgency of providing some kind of forced legitimacy to the Congress rule through elections on the other hand. This was coupled with the fear among the Congress circles about its bleak election performance in the previous years and also a realisation of its incapacity to challenge the left democratically through a system of free and fair elections. The background against which the elections were organised in March 1972 in the state already gave a foretaste to the kind of rule that would come once the Congress was returned to power. And given the intense terror campaign in the state it seemed obvious that the Congress Party would make an all out effort to win elections.

The elections in 1972 had set a new pattern of how parliamentary democracy could be used to serve the interest of the ruling party. According to the AICC(O) resolution on 1972 elections "The election was conducted under the auspices of a party that made no secret of its belief in a committed administrative machinery."²⁸ The ruling party abused the government's power almost thoroughly to promote its partisan interests. There were further allegations of "gerrymandering of constituencies, manipulation of voters lists by addition and deletion, use of the police force for capturing polling booths for the ruling party or to prevent the voters from exercising their franchise with freedom, tampering with ballot boxes, intimidating polling officers and compelling them to serve the interest of the ruling party, commandeering the vehicles belonging to opposition parties, using government's power to control industry and issue licenses to collect and use colossal amount of money for purchasing votes in various ways, altering the system of counting. to prevent the detection of frauds, the monopolistic use of state owned and state-controlled media of mass communication like All India Radio to glorify the ruling party, influencing the press and the perpetuation of many fraudulent practices in the printing, transmission and use of ballot papers.

²⁸ Congress Bulletin (O), October 1972- March 1973, see section on 'AICC Resolution on 1972 Election'.

There were a widespread feeling in the country and almost a universal feeling among the opposition parties that government had tried to rig elections."²⁹

To the thoroughly partisan involvement of the government machinery was added the terror and repression let loose by the CRP, police and strong arm brigades of the Congress Party. This plan of 'combined operations' was entirely aimed at rooting out the left bases from the state since the Congress knew that it could not sway the voters through legitimate parliamentary way.³⁰ This could explain the Congress' hesitation about holding the general elections for West Bengal Assembly along with the rest of India. Interestingly as late as in December 1971 the government position was very much against holding elections in West Bengal. However, the most intriguing part was the overnight reversal of the government's stand when Mrs Gandhi suddenly declared elections in West Bengal.³¹

However, a comparative study of the party position in the West Bengal State Assembly in 1967, 1969, 1971 and 1972 makes it doubtful if the Congress could have won in a properly conducted election. We give below the tables:

29 Op. cit.

30 Jyoti Basu, Subversion of Parliamentary Democracy in West Bengal, Calcutta: CPI(M), May 1972, p. 13.

31 A Marxist Review of Indian Politics, 1967-72, op. cit., pp. 177-8.

Table 1

Party Position in State Assembly in 1967, 1969

<u>Party</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1969</u>
Congress	127	55
Jana Sangh	1	0
Swatantra	1	0
CPI	16	30
CPI(M)	43	80
PSP	7	5
Other Parties (including B.C.)	78	101
Bangla Congress	34	33

Source: Election Commission Reports³²

³² Quoted in Sushila Kaushik, Elections in India - Its Social Basis, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1982, p. 102.

Table II

Party Positions in the State Assembly in 1971, 1972³³

<u>Party</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>Party</u>	<u>1972</u>
Congress	105	Congress	216
CPI	13	CPI	35
CP(M)	111	CP(M)	14
Cong(O)	2	Congress(O)	2
Bangla Congress	5	Jana Sangh	0
Forward Bloc	3	Socialist	0
Muslim League	7	Swatantra	0
Jana Sangh	1	Others	8 ^o
RSP	3	Independents	5
SUC	7	* 1.e. Gorkha League	
SSP	1	2, RSP 3, Muslim	
PSP	3	League SUC and	
Gorkha League	2	Workers Party 1	
Forward Bloc (Marxist)	2	each	
RCPI	3		
Workers Party	2		
Biplabi Bangla Congress	1		
Others & Independents	6		

³³ Reproduced from Review of Elections to State Assemblies (1972), and Resolutions Adopted by the National Council, New Delhi, 14-18 April 1972, Communist Party Publication.

Following the election results, it could be argued that the fall of seats of CPI(M) to 14 in 1972 elections from 111 in 1971 was wholly unexpected as also the Congress tally of 216 seats in 1972 as against 105 in 1971.³⁴ The result seemed to be misleading because even in 1971 elections in West Bengal the CPI(M) increased its share of votes from 19 per cent in 1969 to 32 per cent in 1971.³⁵ Rigging on a massive scale is evident from the fact that in Congress strongholds its percentage of votes declined while in almost all leftwing strongholds it won with massive majority. It was obvious that the Congress Party had concentrated its 'political' campaign primarily in left strong holds whereas it neglected its own constituencies. The outcome as reflected in the election results 'was neither consistent with the past record, nor was it the trend in the rest of the state'.³⁶ It also proved that system of election was subverted to a great extent.

The subversion of parliamentary democracy in West Bengal threw up several dangerous symptoms which violated the accepted norms of democracy. The consistent anti-people and anti-democratic policies of the Congress had utterly exposed its authoritarian nature. Along with this, organised repression

34 Biplab Dasgupta, "The 1972 Elections in West Bengal", Economic and Political Weekly, 15 August 1972, vol. 7, no. 8.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

and attack on the left and democratic movement by activating the state apparatus like the army, police and administration had given the strategies and tactics of the Congress Party a near fascist character.

Authoritarianism, at its initial stage comes to power, formally at least, through a certain degree of constitutional support for the authority. As it establishes and maintains itself, there is a greater reliance on the power of the state apparatus. Likewise the Congress Party's rise to authoritarianism had also come about gradually in a constitutional manner. Authoritarianism also needs to have a certain mass base for its existence. For this it relies to a great extent on populism to gain support. The authoritarianism of the Congress Party under Mrs Gandhi's leadership also had a large element of populism in it. Her leftism, socialism and 'Garibi Hatao' policies contained this populist element with which she generated new illusions for the masses, particularly the large section of the petty-bourgeoisie on whose support it counted. Mrs Gandhi after being successful in doing this had utilised the state apparatus to demolish democracy as soon as a crisis was created for the Congress Party. The use of patently anti-democratic method initiated a more centralised and authoritarian phase of Congress rule. A significant development of this consolidation of authority of the Congress Party had been its close collusion with the state apparatus.

However this only indicated that the Congress Party had further lost its legitimacy to rule democratically. So was the need at a subsequent stage to do away with the distinction between the party and the state so that the repressive apparatus of the state could be utilised to serve the interest of the party. West Bengal bore the clear proof of this tendency. However, it is also important to note that whereas in West Bengal such blurring of the distinction between the Congress Party and the state apparatus to a large extent served the purposes of repression, in subsequent years in West Bengal, as also in other states, no such distinction remained between the party and government, even when it was not so overtly authoritarian. In the ultimate analysis, the obliteration of the distinction between the party and the government is also symptomatic of the authoritarian transformation of the Congress Party which holds true even today.

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CHAPTER III

THE IDEOLOGY AND OPERATION OF CHHATRA PARISHAD AND YOUTH CONGRESS IN WEST BENGAL

An important aspect of the Congress Party's transformation had been the open support and involvement of a large section of students and youth in launching attacks on the left and democratic forces in West Bengal. The purpose of this chapter is to reveal how far the student and youth elements of the Congress Party were successful in promoting open terrorism in West Bengal. We shall undertake the discussion by first tracing the origin of the student and youth wings in the Congress Party and then focus on their role and actual performance in West Bengal during 1967 - 1972.

The framework of argument is the realisation by the Congress Party that it could not oppose and contain the left democratically. The election reversal of 1967 had set the entire Congress Party in disarray. Along with this it also established the fact that leftism and people's protests in West Bengal had already reached a high tide which had to be countered in order to regain its position. Also given the specificity of the society and politics in West Bengal, the nature and content of challenge mounted

by the left against the Congress was a formidable one. While West Bengal had traditionally been a 'fortress for Leftism', this was for the first time that the growing opposition to Congress rule was organised and unified under a leftist platform spearheaded by the CPI(M) which succeeded in rooting out the Congress. Thereafter its steady growth in the subsequent elections in 1969 and in 1971 prevented any attempts by the Congress Party to challenge it constitutionally. Therefore Congress changed its strategy and tactics and launched attacks more overtly to bring in a 'reign of terror' in the state. It is against this background that the Congress Party brought into existence a new political force in the name of Youth and Student Congress, mobilising them under a radical slogan, but actually utilising them for carrying out the tasks of counter-revolution and attacks on democracy in West Bengal.

From the defeat of the Congress Party in West Bengal in 1967 till the dismissal of second United Front Ministry in March 1970 there was no such serious attack on the left and democratic forces in the state. After 1970, especially after the Congress' victory in the Lok Sabha election in 1971 an entirely new phase of politics started in West Bengal. The precarious industrial situation in the state developed out of working class militancy and the spread of Naxalite movement grew into a serious law and order problem which was

increasingly used by the ruling party to organise systematic attacks on the left and democratic forces to unleash a reign of terror in the state. Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad played an active role during this period. Their activities form the focus of the chapter.

The Lumpen Politics of Congress

Along with this mobilisation and consolidation of the youth and student wings of the Congress Party another significant development took place. A large number of lumpen and anti-social elements were also recruited in the organisation of the Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad. It is important to look at this force since it reflected a sharp change in the social base of the Congress Party. They also played a considerably important role in the terror politics of Congress.

Theoretically the term lumpen proliteriat originated in the writing of Marx. He argued that the class belonged for the most part to that section which formed a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat. It became a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds i.e., people without a definite trade or vagabonds.¹ Lenin also used the term to mean lumpens of the proletariat class. Mao used the term in a broader sense when he said

¹ Karl Marx, The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975, p. 44.

that lumpens originated from the social scums and vagrants of society. In modern times the term 'element declasses' has been still more broadened to include declassified elements from all classes which could not recall themselves. But the most characteristic factor that Marx emphasised about these classes was their counter-revolutionary nature.²

Declassed elements stand isolated in a class society even though they are its products. In a class society, due to economic and political reasons declassing goes on as a continuous process. But there is another very important factor which hastens this process. As Jyotirmoy Gupta points out, "...when in a society political crisis is acute and when the change of social order is the cry of the day, but the society is not advancing in a desired speed due to failure and immaturity of people and parties of the vanguard class, this happens understandably at a great speed."³

Thus the lumpen proletariat or the declassified elements do not belong to any particular class socially, economically or politically. They exist by themselves. "They are idlers and again militant grabbers."⁴ Though the mainstay of the lumpen proletariat is the working class, their members are recruited from the poor peasantry and the lower middle class.

2 Ibid.

3 Jyotirmoy Gupta, "Elements Declasses and their Role", Mainstream, 24 April 1971.

4 Ibid.

Their field of activity is mostly confined to towns or small towns. Though mostly unorganised, their opportunism often brings them under the shelter of bigger established organisations like the ruling party and its repressive apparatus like the police. "In a class society the ruling class also seeks the help of the declasses, because by helping and organising them, the ruling class organises terrorism to suppress popular movements."⁵ For many progressive changes in the society this class generally serves counter-revolution and reaction.

Particularly in underdeveloped countries like India because of huge unemployment, population explosion and large scale migrations from rural areas into cities, the lumpen proletariat forms a sizeable section of the city population. Though politically their objective socio-economic position generally makes them a reserve of reaction, but with proper political education and mobilisation of these unorganised section they can also play a progressive role as people's allies. In fact in the Naxalite movement a sizeable section of these unorganised urban youth were involved because of their political education by the CFI(ML). However, due to their inherent vacillations, these groups are vulnerable to the pressures of the ruling classes.

5 Ibid.

It is due to this streak that authoritarianism counts on their support to a large extent, particularly in a period of political crisis when ruling classes lose the support of the broad strata of society and are unable to establish its leadership over the working class, peasantry and the middle class, they invariably resort to repressive legislations and try to mobilise sympathy of these declassed groups among the petty-bourgeoisie or the lumpen-proletariat.⁶

Similar objective reasons brought into existence a large section of lumpen proletariat as an active political force in the Congress Youth and Student Organisation. They constituted the core of Congress' 'strong arm brigades'. They joined Congress to gain certain advantages. The leaders too sought their services to manipulate local developments. Though it is a common knowledge that almost every political party has a certain number of lumpens and anti-socials as its activists, one could certainly agree with Sajal Basu that "Never before the ruling party did try to mobilise the loose link into open political activities. Never before 1967 did they take such an active part in politics."⁷

The Genesis of Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad

Political parties invariably attempt to organise, mobilise and recruit students as a social category and a

6 Barun De, "The Lumpen Politics of Congress", Now, 7 October 1966.

7 Sajal Basu, West Bengal - The Violent Years, Calcutta: Prachi, 1974, p. 107.

political force.⁸ The student and youth organisations in the Congress Party (Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress) were more of a mass front without any important political role to play. The Congress Party throughout its history was always against any systematic policy which would bring the students into the vortex of popular movements. On the contrary, the main plank of their slogan was 'students should keep away from politics'. Thus we find that during 1950s and 1960s, neither the Chhatra Parishad nor the Youth Congress had any positive political stand.

As a result, the old Chhatra Parishad from its very inception in 1954 to the formation of the first non-Congress Government in 1967, virtually was unimportant and somewhat neglected. Its organisation was markedly reactionary.⁹ Moreover, the Pradesh Congress Committee in West Bengal dominated by Atulya Ghosh's group did not permit student and youth Congress in the state, even though Chhatra Parishad was virtually formed in the state in 1954 with the blessings of Nehru. After the students movement in the state in 1958 when it joined Students Federation in its protest against

8 Rudolph and Rudolph, "Student Politics and National Politics", Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number, July 1971, p. 1659.

9 Ramkrishna Bhattacharya, "Birth and Rise of Chhatra Parishad", Indian Left Review, December 1971, p. 17.

the enhancement of fees in colleges, its relative autonomy was partially accepted. Thereafter, as the Students Federation gained prominence, the Chhatra Parishad again moved back to anti-communism and attack against the leftist students organisation. It remained loyal to Congress Government. As the need to revitalise the Congress Party became necessary after its defeat in 1967 elections, Calcutta University Chhatra Parishad unit was formed in 1968 by Subrata Mukherjee. After the 1971 victory of the Congress in which entire election campaign was manned by the young Congressmen, they vigorously backed the Congress units and were actively sponsored by the youth Congress stalwarts.¹⁰

However, the moving force behind the formation of the youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad was the Congress election debacle in 1967. In West Bengal this followed a series of popular movements. In many cases students provided the leadership to these movements. The famous food movement in West Bengal, students protest against the increase of tram fare and various other protest movements had already put the students in crucial positions. The Congress Party soon realised that in the face of its growing political crisis it is no longer sensible to stick to the old Congress slogan to keep students away from politics, but to utilize this revolutionary potential of the students to its own interest.

¹⁰ Ibid.

All these resulted in the formulation of programmes for a radical change in the Congress organisation as well as building up a mass front of the party. The Congress Working Committee ended its marathon deliberations on 13 May 1967, with a resolution on the relationship between the government and party organisation. The crux of the resolution was an emphasis on building a suitable machinery to 'assess and review' the implementation of the Congress policy and programme by the government. The Committee decided on coordination between the government and organisational wings of the Congress in order to retain and strengthen its mass base.¹¹ The same resolution also projected Mrs Gandhi's statement that 'the party must make a dent among the youth and the student since without them the party cannot function effectively'.¹² This new phenomenon of emphasis on the development of student and youth wings was portrayed by the Congress leadership as a proof of progressism.¹³ There was also a massive build up of power and authority around these youth leadership.¹⁴

In West Bengal the old guards heading the party's affairs for so long were faced with severe criticism from the

11 The Statesman (Calcutta), 14 May 1967.

12 Ibid., 26 June 1967.

13 "Spotlight on Youth and Student Congress", People's Democracy, 14 May 1967.

14 Ajit Ray, Economic and Politics of Garibi Hatao, Calcutta: Naya Prakash, 1973, p. 127.

Youth Congress which attributed party's debacle to the inadequate contact between the party base and the leadership. Subsequently, they demanded a change in West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee.¹⁵

In effect this meant that a new brand of leaders had emerged to replace the old guards. Mrs Gandhi was the chosen leader of this new and resurgent Congress. After the split in 1969 she had acquired enough tact and political maturity to eliminate most of her political opponents in the syndicate, who once were instrumental in bringing her to power in 1966. She overnight became the champion of socialism and sought support among the student and youth to present her radical image. Henceforth, all the exercises of revitalisation and reorganisation of the party in various states were carried on under this radical posture.

The Congress split in 1969 gave a further boost to her radical image. Though some observers noted that the split in the Congress originated from personal and not ideological differences between Mrs Gandhi and the Syndicate leaders,¹⁶ it is perhaps more correct to say that the difference between Mrs Gandhi and Syndicates and the split was not only

15 The Statesman (Calcutta), 4 April 1967.

16 "Political Polarisation" (editorial), The Radical Humanist, vol. 34, no. 2, May 1970.

on personal grounds, it was the different perceptions and options to be followed by the political representatives of the ruling classes. How clear Mrs Gandhi's options were became obvious from the political developments in West Bengal, particularly after 1971.

In the first place the Congress Working Committee decided to dissolve the elected Pradesh Congress Committee in West Bengal and replaced it with ad hoc committees since it was felt that 'the reorganisation of the state units would give an opportunity to the central leaders to induct fresh blood into the party, to place committed men in positions where they could give a radical look to the organisation'.¹⁷ Actually the need to keep the Congress organisation before the people was urgent in those days so that the people accept it as a progressive organisation. The next step was to organise systematic attacks on the left and democratic forces in the state. As Ajit Roy stated that 1969 marked the beginning of Mrs Gandhi's power struggle against the syndicate and the main thrust of her policies after this period was directed towards the "break up of the left led United Front Governments in West Bengal and Kerala and the suppression of militant left movements in different parts of the country".¹⁸ It is

17 "How New is the New Look?" Mainstream, 30 October 1971.

18 Ajit Roy, op. cit., p. 127.

here that the mass organisations of the Congress i.e. its student and youth wings had been given a special role.

Subsequently dissensions within the Congress in West Bengal over the issue of organisational leadership also reached its height with Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad mounting pressure for a change.¹⁹ The youth group then led by Priya Ranjan Das Munshi claimed that young generation constituted 60 per cent of the party in West Bengal.²⁰ It was argued that the radical policies of Mrs Gandhi had attracted the majority of the youth. It was also legitimately felt that a new generation had come up since the last election whose services could be utilised and this could undoubtedly be a decisive factor in the results of the mid term poll in 1971.²¹ The Congress Party thus acquired a new social base with the emergence of a new group of political leaders replacing the old guards. Priya Ranjan Das Munshi, the then leader, who headed the Youth Congress in West Bengal, also commented during an interview with the present writer that the Congress Party was composed of two categories of people, as enumerated below:

19 "Change in West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee Leadership", Young Indian, 5 August 1971.

20 Ibid.

21 Socialist India, 23 January 1971, pp. 31-32.

- (1) Increasing number of members were drawn in from the middle class and the lower middle class.
- (2) Youngsters from refugee belt also took keen interest under the leadership of Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad.²²

The second factor was a clear indicator of the transformation of the Congress in the direction of growing lumpenisation. The need to recruit the anti-social elements, the unemployed and lumpen youths in the organisations of the Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad was largely to use their services as the main instrument of attack on the left in the West Bengal.²³ It is not true to say as one important paper had commented that the emergence of student and youth wing in the Congress in West Bengal was a significant upshot of Mrs Gandhi's political line of fighting the dead wood of the syndicate at the Centre.²⁴ Rather, it should be noted that the emergence of youth and student Congress in West Bengal had a special importance. Their support was used primarily to contend with the growing leftism in the state. As the organisation grew strong, they served the objective need of the Congress to perpetuate a terror rule in the state. They

22 Extracts of the interview with Priya Ranjan Das Munshi by the writer in Calcutta on 12 January 1982, at his residence.

23 People's Democracy, 14 May 1972, "Spotlight on Youth and Student Congress".

24 Mainstream, 20 March 1971, p. 11.

became notable for their 'militancy'. The widespread violence and terror which marred West Bengal's political scene, particularly from 1971 onwards till the Congress comeback in 1972 was largely the achievements of these 'militants' in the party. On the national level however they were far less significant. Youth Congress became a significant national force after the Jayaprakash Narayan's movement in 1974. It coincided with the dominance of Sanjay Gandhi in national politics.

Growth of Factionalism

Subsequent to the enormous mobilisation of Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad, factional conflicts had grown more than ever before. The growth of several rival centres of power among the supporters of Congress was a major concern which accentuated factional conflicts. In fact, the Congress Party in the state had been suffering from the worst type of intra-party feud since the beginning.²⁶ The ad hoc committee headed by Abdur Sattar which was formed by dissolving the elected Pradesh Congress Committee was as a result of bitter tussle between B.S. Nahar and T.K. Ghosh over the leadership. But later, both these groups wooed the so-called Young Turks for their personal gains.²⁷ As the Youth Congress and

26 "West Bengal Congress is now a Heaven for Hooligans", Organiser, 4 December 1971.

27 Ibid.

Chhatra Parishad became extra strong no organisational discipline and cohesion could be maintained. They practically controlled the entire party organisation. The party had no political programme at this critical juncture of the state and the fact that a man without dash and personality like Abdur Sattar was chosen by Mrs Gandhi was due to the fact that he was acceptable to both the warring groups.²⁸

But later the patrons were even frightened by the unchecked growth and reckless activities of the Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad, though it was clear enough that the vested interests needed their services to eliminate their political rivals.

Organisational discipline and cohesion had never been a strong point of the Youth Congress. The issues were raised in a big way in view of the distribution of party tickets before the West Bengal Assembly elections in 1972. The indiscriminate recruitment of hoodlum elements in the Congress and open patronage extended to them by the tallest among the party leaders led to headlong collisions among rival groups which were but proxy war of the principals for the control of the State Congress.²⁹ The apparently brighter election prospects for Congress Party created by the strongarm brigades

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Liquidation of the Left", Economic and Political Weekly, 4 December 1971.

produced a powerful incentive to bitter infighting for power and privilege".³⁰ Consolidation of authority of the Congress Party was achieved amidst this intra-party factionalism. A strong central rule was needed to check the growing dissidence in the party to curb the revolutionary forces. Given this objective situation, Mrs. Gandhi's bid for power was made easier. She became the embodiment of authority.

Method of attack of Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress

The spurt of urban violence that swept West Bengal and Calcutta particularly, which to a large extent is the focus of our study could largely be traced to the operation of the Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress. Though primarily brought into existence by the Congress Party in order to contain and combat the left and democratic forces, they subsequently went out of direct control even of the party organisation.³¹ As a coercive force they soon became unchallenged. It is not our purpose to describe the numerous isolated incidents by which the attacks were carried on. Nevertheless, in the present analysis we shall only describe its broad nature and some specific aspects.

30 Ibid.

31 Frontier (Editorial), 23 October 1971.

In the first place, trade union leaders individually or in a group, had been the victims of fiercest attacks. Soon after the downfall of the second United Front ministry, Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress launched a planned attack on the organised trade union movements. Several offices of the CPI(M) trade unions had been forcibly occupied and several hundred trade union members claimed to have switched their allegiance either to INTUC or to individual Congress trade unionists or to the labour cell of Pradesh Congress Committee under pressure.³² Business executives and factory managers were threatened with dire consequences in case they failed to provide jobs to local boys owing allegiance either to Youth Congress or Chhatra Parishad. Several other important leftist trade union leaders and even members were physically liquidated.

Since the inception of the United Front Government in West Bengal, law and order problem was raised in a big way by the Congress Party to discredit the popular government. In fact, during most of the period between 1967-72 in which the state was placed under the President's rule the hoodlums of the Congress' student and youth wing received the green signal from the Central leadership to go out on rampage assisted by the police, army and CRP. On the day of bandh

32 "Congress Riddled with Goonda Element", Organiser, 27 May 1972.

called by the left parties, workers and office goers had been forced to join normal services and this resulted in the outburst of violence. Terror was unleashed on the streets of Calcutta and many other parts of West Bengal in open daylight since the Congress Party had used open force and violence on the people. An important weekly reported that "whereas in 1966 the Congress did not dare to hold a public meeting in Calcutta in 1971, on a bandh day called by the left parties, the storm troopers of the Congress backed by the armed minions of the state, cajoled and coerced government employees and factory workers to join the duty. They even occupied the vacant chairs, beat up the workers and employees and forced part of the public transport to run. Never had the authority been so ruthless under a democratic facade."³³

Another formidable ground of attack was the educational system and the educational institutions. A total lawlessness pervaded the West Bengal's entire educational system due to their total defiance of academic norms. Boycott of examinations, burning of question papers, mass copying in examinations and such other activities of the Chhatra Parishad put the entire educational system in shambles. In many cases, in the face of opposition from the Students Federation, it resorted to

³³ Frontier (editorial), 23 October 1971.

open and armed attacks on its members. The aim was to disrupt the regular working of academic institutions. Consequently there was an attempt at forcible capture of college unions by the Chhatra Parishad. In several colleges they conducted elections at the point of dagger and gun, while in most others the elections were held up so as to give them a free play. All these were just the prelude to the final takeover. Although Chhatra Parishad had negligible strength in most of the Calcutta colleges, yet on the eve of elections in 1972 they won 97 per cent of the college unions.³⁴

The culmination of all this was the attack on the democratic and parliamentary system of elections in the state. It was clear from the prevailing situation that the ensuing elections to the State Assembly in 1972, deliberately separated from the parliamentary elections held one year before, was going to be crucial in more than one sense. It was going to be a choice between the democratic and totalitarian forces. Jyoti Basu's brilliant tract 'Subversion of Parliamentary Democracy in West Bengal' testifies to the mockery of democracy in West Bengal.

It was clear from the developments in the state that the Congress Party was quite confident of winning elections and made preparations accordingly. It used force in wide scale capture of booths, tampering with ballot boxes and papers, intimidation of polling officials, beating up of

34 Indian Express, 19 February 1972.

left candidates and in successfully creating a situation which prevented free and fair voting. Particularly those constituencies which were CPI(M) strongholds saw an intensification of terror by the youth and anti-socials of the Congress. It was quite clear, as Jyoti Basu commented that "Prime Minister not only knew what was happening, not only had she given her blessings to the activities of those hoodlums, but the Congress leadership including Mrs Gandhi and the entire government machinery had actually drawn the blue print for this fantastic attack on parliamentary democracy."³⁵

All these brought into focus a new dimension of Congress politics. On the one hand it changed the social base of the Congress Party by bringing in lumpens and anti-social elements in its mainstream, on the other hand, a close liaison was established between the law breaking and law enforcing agencies for facilitating its terror tactics against the left forces.³⁶ This is what Sajal Basu called "Pseudo political and anti-social violence had been politicised and taken an institutional form".³⁷

35 Jyoti Basu, Subversion of Parliamentary Democracy in West Bengal, Calcutta: CPI(M), p. 9; for documents of Congress' rigging operations and voting figures see Appendices I, II and III of the same book.

36 Ajit Roy, Political Power in India - Nature and Trends, Calcutta: Naya Prakash, 1978.

37 Sajal Basu, The Violent Years, Calcutta: Prachi, 1974, p. 112.

The formidable expansion of the Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad is indeed a very significant index of the depth of Congress Party's transformation in West Bengal in terms of style, activity and membership. It gave a new support base to the Congress rule by which Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress became dominant political instruments. But that did not mean that state power was exercised exclusively in their interests. It is exercised nevertheless in the interests of the bourgeois and rural rich.

The violence organised by the ruling classes in West Bengal with anti-socials as the main instrument was sought to be covered up with extravagant claims of the mass influence of Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad. But a large section had rallied behind these organisations because that served their personal gains. On the other hand, support for Mrs Gandhi was not only due to student-youth opportunism, there was also an element of faith in the petty bourgeois socialist slogans of Mrs Gandhi. In fact, the left parties in the Centre had supported many of these so-called progressive and anti-monopoly measures. The Indira wave of 1971, though not as strong in West Bengal, had also some effect. Moreover the fratricidal warfare among the left, particularly among the CPI(M) and Naxalites alienated many people from left politics. The people wanted peace and stability which was promised by the Congress.

Objectively, however, the entire organisation of Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad with their essentially lumpenised social base and the role they performed in West Bengal was only the manifestation of acute political crisis in the Congress Party. The fact that they formed the support base of the Congress was due to the reason that authoritarianism of the Congress Party largely counted on them. Because, the administration knew it well that 'without the protecting umbrella of terror unleashed and so far perpetuated by these elements the bankrupt and alienated Congress regime might get swept away from power once again like 1967 once the popular forces despite their shortcomings are allowed to move and act freely even within the extremely restricted framework of democratic liberties' that existed in West Bengal.³⁹ This was a further proof of Congress' loss of legitimacy.

39 Ajit Roy, op. cit., p. 121.

CHAPTER IV

CLASS STRUGGLES IN THE INDUSTRIES AND TRADE UNIONS

As one of the most industrialised states, West Bengal has a sizable working class. Since the 1920 the working class was being increasingly unionised, often under leftist leadership. The working class was by and large confined to economic movements. The economic crisis and recession in the mid 1960s had a devastating effect on West Bengal's economy. This marked a new phase in the state's politics. The recession caused large scale unemployment and economic hardship for the working class. It was also the period when the left parties gained considerable strength and formed the United Front Government in 1967. These two phenomena acted as complementary factors for the massive growth of organised working class movements all over the state. The new working class upsurge evolved new forms of protest evidenced in the 'gherao' movement. It also became much more intensely politicised. The resulting breakdown of discipline and control by the management over the workers and the emergence of the working class was an important political development in the state. Both these aspects of the working

class movement posed challenge to the bourgeoisie. The capitalists felt the urgent need to 'discipline' the working class and confine it to economic movements. All these resulted in organised attacks on the trade union movements of the working class initiated by the Congress Party and sponsored by its trade union wing in open collusion with the management and state machinery.

The aim of the chapter is to show how and why the Congress Party sought to destroy the democratic movement of working class. The tendencies towards consolidating an authoritarian rule were evident since 1969 and were further accelerated by open violent attacks on the organised trade union movement. We have discussed the chapter broadly under two sections. In the first section we have tried to show the objective situation that led to increased militancy among the working class. In the second section we have tried to show the nature of Congress Party's attack on the working class.

United Front Government's new Labour Policy

The first non-Congress Government assumed office in West Bengal with some basic changes of its policy towards the working class. An important policy pronouncement

of the United Front Government on the labour front was the support extended to the right to strike by workers and the denial of police protection to the employers. Thus, the trend of confrontation between the capitalists and labour, in which the ruling party, i.e. the Congress Party always stood by industrialists, was reversed in favour of the workers. This naturally attracted widespread support of the working class. The main features of the policy suggested by the then labour minister Subodh Banerjee were the followings

- (1) There must be drastic reorganisation of all committees and boards of the labour department so that all trade union organisations were represented on them.
- (2) Effective measures were proposed to expedite adjudication by tribunals.
- (3) The system of labour contracts were to be gradually abolished.
- (4) There must be a revision of minimum wage rates in order to take into account the rise in the cost of living.
- (5) The labour minister also discouraged retrenchment.¹

¹ See report on "West Bengal's Labour Policy", Capital, 16 March 1967.

Inspired by the progressive attitude of the government, the state witnessed a rapid spurt of trade union affiliations. The long standing machinery of conciliation and arbitration which subserved the interest of the ruling class always stood against any kind of militant trade unionism. Moreover, any kind of administrative and police help were readily available to stand by the employers in case of any labour-management dispute or to curb and control any labour unrest as such. With the assumption of power by the United Front Government, the left parties pinned faith in the workers and employees rights. Militant trade unionism was legitimised to put forward workers demands.

The most significant development in the trade union front was the legal sanction given to the 'gherao' movement of the working class. Gherao as a working class weapon was not a new phenomenon. As early as 1959 in the AITUC survey of industrial relations in coal mines the term was used quite often. It was only in the late 1960s after the installation of United Front Ministry in West Bengal that the movement took a new leaf. It became enormously popular and was resorted to by the employees in the Calcutta industrial belt as part of their

agitation over the profit-bonus issue.² As an important survey notes that "Industrial unrest in West Bengal took a new turn in March 1967. The known weapons of working class militancy i.e. strike, demonstration, go slow, work to rule and so on seemed to have been cast aside in favour of gherao."³

It was true that the movement developed in the face of acute food scarcity in the state, high cost of living, population explosion, chronic under utilisation of capacity in the industries and many other related factors. But these did not by themselves explain the vehemence of the movement. Other contextual factors could not be overlooked. And definitely the consistent anti-labour attitude of the Congress Party was the most important reason. The protest against economic stagnation and large scale lay-offs due to the Congress Party's policy of protecting the interest of capitalists acquired a new stridency in the gherao movement.⁴ The sharp deterioration

2 Nitish R. De and Suresh Srivastava, "Gheraos in West Bengal - A Study of Industrial Conflict", Economic and Political Weekly, 18 November 1967, pp. 2015-22.

3 Ibid., p. 2015.

4 Economic and Political Weekly, 1 April 1967, p. 633.

in the climate of industrial relations and the employment situation in the state was causing concern within government and outside. The Governor in his address on the joint sitting of the Houses focussed on the following figures to show to what extent the faulty economic and fiscal policies pursued for years by the Centre had led to a serious deterioration in the field of industrial relations.

Table I

Retrenchment Figures in West Bengal Industry⁵

	Y e a r s		
	1966	1967	1968
No. of persons laid off (Units affected)	121,162 (337)	61,155 (321)	117,768 (522)
No. of persons retrenched (Units affected)	3,779 (202)	6,054 (243)	12,802 (327)
No. of units closed down (No. thrown out of employment)	37 (2,560)	102 (8,266)	149 (26,220)

A major characteristics of the 'gherao' movement was the involvement of almost all central trade union

⁵ West Bengal Legislative Assembly, Assembly Proceedings Official Report, session 48, March 1969.

federations. One index of this was the rise in registration of new trade unions during this period. As Nitish De commented: "Never in the history of trade union movement in West Bengal had unionisation taken such big stride."⁶ But as the movement grew it became the battleground of several rival unions. Subsequently inter-union rivalries were provoked by the Congress Party giving rise to serious law and order problem in the state. The situation was then exploited by the Congress Party to make its own political gain. In the trade union front, Congress Party's terror campaign against the left and democratic forces came down heavily on attacking them to liquidate the leftist influence on them. It utilised the labour-management dispute very tactfully to indulge in acts of violence aimed at fellow employees rather than managerial and supervisory personnel.

A New Phase of the Movement and
the Law and Order Situation

The gherao movement became popular during the United Front regime of 1967. And from its very inception

6 N.R. Dey, S. Srivastava, "Gheraos in West Bengal - A Study of Industrial Conflict", part III, Economic and Political Weekly, 2 December 1967, p. 2099.

the central government extended its all out help to suppress this movement of the working class. Despite the policy of indiscriminate lay-off, lock out and closure of factories, in the state's some of the most important industries like jute, textile and engineering, the workers through their united struggle obtained unprecedented victories.

The statistics below indicate that the industrial scene in West Bengal worsened due to lockouts. And the study of industrial stagnation by Debdas Banerjee revealed that more mandays were lost in West Bengal on account of lockouts than on account of industrial strikes.⁷

Table II

Percentage of Mandays Lost due to Lockouts
in Relation to Total Mandays lost (8)

Year	All India	West Bengal
1966	25.0	80.7
1967	38.4	69.5
1968	35.8	53.0
1969	18.7	18.6
1970	28.3	38.7
1971	28.7	62.3
1972	33.1	73.9

7 Debdas Banerjee, "Industrial Stagnation in Eastern India - A Statistical Investigation", Economic and Political Weekly, 27 February 1982, p. 339.

8 Quoted in Debdas Banerjee, *ibid.*, from Indian Labour Year Book.

The figure reveals that the percentage mandays lost was far more in case of West Bengal compared to the all India percentage. The rate had further sharpened since the period from 1970 to 1972. Incidentally that was the time when the state was mostly under President's rule.

Notwithstanding the dismal condition of the industry in West Bengal the working class gave spontaneous support to the 'gherao' movement. It was seen by them as an effective means to achieve some economic benefits which were long denied to them. The Congress Party understood that it had lost the political capacity of restraining the tide of working class revolt democratically. Consequently, it let loose a gamut of repressive measures. Its first attempt was to bring down the democratically elected government in West Bengal. It succeeded in November 1967 as the state was brought under President's rule. But then as the United Front Ministry came back to power again in 1969 with a more pronounced majority and with the left forces more powerful than before, the Congress Party's attack on the working class and democratic forces became more naked.

1969 began a new phase of the 'gherao' movement. As Nitish Ranjan De observed: "The movement re-emerged

in 1969 offering certain characteristics absent in the earlier phase of the movement."⁹ The movement received strong support from the leftist coalition government in the state, in 1969. Throughout the years from 1947 to 1966 the question of industrial legality and political decision making itself subscribed to the shared norms of governance by the ruling class. In that context union-management conflict becomes an unequal confrontation between the state power and the working class since the working class is forced to operate within the confines of industrial legality made to the advantage of the ruling class.¹⁰ With the advent of the leftist government political decision makers sought to neutralise the administrative machinery so that the repressive power of the state could not be used against the working class. Confronted with this reality, the working class received political sanction of open confrontation.

Understandably 'gheraos' became one of the central government's major headaches. Business and

9 Nitish R. De, "Gherao as a technique of Social Intervention", Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number 1971.

10 Ibid.

industry in West Bengal were deeply worried about the sharp deterioration in labour relations. The anxiety stemmed from the imprisonment of the administrative and managerial staff since their hands were tied by the fact that the new government had asked the police not to interfere in labour disputes unless the trouble developed into a violent law and order problem. This gave a big handle to the Congress Party to bring down systematic attacks on the trade unions, particularly on CITU controlled by the CPI (M). This was part of its all out campaign which was intensified after the installation of the second United Front ministry. The Congress took the help of new political forces like the lumpens, criminals and anti-social gangsters to attack the left and democratic forces. It devised new tactics and methods of installing a reign of terror throughout the state. All these bore close parallel to the fascist form of repression.

The law and order problem was raised in a big way by the ruling party to bring an end to the democratically elected state government. This had been one of the major pretexts in bringing in President's rule in the state. In the wake of industrial unrest that swept the state the Congress Party had always found it convenient to exploit

any kind of labour-management dispute, by interpreting them as serious law and order problem. The 'gherao' bogey was created because West Bengal government stopped police from interfering in peaceful labour agitations. As soon as West Bengal Government announced that it would treat employers and workers on equal footing and would not permit police interference in the normal exercise of trade union and democratic rights by the workers, a furious barrage of propaganda started against it.¹¹ During 1967-72, while most of the time the state was under President's rule in one pretext or another, the Congress 'strong arms' had gained an open approval from the ruling party to carry on terror campaign indiscriminately. It freed the forces of reaction and counted on their support. President's rule gave a foretaste of the nature of Congress rule once it came back to power.¹² It became virtually 'a Congress Government by proxy'.¹³

Response of the Congress to the
CPI (M) led Trade Unions

The political basis of the industrial malaise in West Bengal had always been obvious. Trade unions were

11 Patriot, 19 May 1967.

12 Frontier, vol. 1, no. 19, 17 August 1968.

13 Ibid., vol. 1, no. 36, 14 December 1968.

the arenas where various political parties tested their relative strength. As the majority of the working class pinned their hopes on the left forces, confrontations between different ideologies became more pronounced in the industrial field.¹⁴ The Congress Party took this opportunity to eliminate the distinction between trade unionism and politics and trade unions which should function primarily for the protection of workers' interests were converted into powerful weapons for the use of political warfare.

With the slogan of fighting the syndicate the Congress Party under the leadership of Mrs Gandhi started in right earnest a fight against the democratic forces and anti-Congress democratic front. Its offensive on the industrial front was not recent. There was hardly any change in Mrs Gandhi's attitudes to industry and trade that consistently sided with the capital, though her pronouncements on different occasions about the economic situation and the role of private sector confounded the people. Such were her slogans of 'socialism' and 'mixed economy' which were conveniently raised to serve her political interest.¹⁵ All

14 Hindustan Times, 30 April 1971.

15 Frontier, "On the Home Front", 24 April 1971.

these made it possible for the Congress Party, with its profuse promises of socialism to forge regular and violent attacks on the working class strikes and check all independent trade union movements. In view of mounting labour unrest in West Bengal, particularly by the end of 1970 the ruling party took up the proposal for an Industrial Relations Commission, armed with full powers of arbitration and banning of workers 'strikes'. This was one of the measures which nullified the power given to the workers under United Front rule in West Bengal.¹⁶ By and large the Congress policy attacked the leftist trade unions by promoting inter union and even intra union rivalries. The INTUC leadership helped to serve the official end.

The fiercest kind of attack on the trade unions was the indiscriminate murder of the leaders and workers of the trade unions. Murderous assaults were organised by the ruling party by its activised anti-socials and gangsters who worked in the name of Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress on the members of the trade unions. During the whole period of President's rule in the state, more so, after the Democratic Coalition

16 "New Delhi's Labour Conference Belies", Capital, 3 June 1971.

government led by the Congress came into power in West Bengal for a brief period in 1971, the number of attacks and political murders went up by leaps and bounds. Even according to the figure given by the government, in 1970 there were 436 political murders while in 1971 the figures went up to 1,169.¹⁷ Not only individual murders, but also other forms of terror attacks by the Congress Party were mentioned by the CITU (W.B.) in one of its studies. This was to attack and beat up the workers and employees in the localities where they stayed in large numbers, scaring away the people by large scale arrest and thus capturing the union offices, sometimes even to the extent of setting fire to them. This method of attack was carried on by the ruling Congress' Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress in close liaison with the CRP, police and the anti-socials.¹⁸

A CITU memorandum to the Union Law Minister stated: "The Government of West Bengal has been systematically treating every industrial dispute as a law and order problem and resorted to brutal repression with

17 Jyoti Basu, Subversion of Parliamentary Democracy in West Bengal, Calcutta: CPI(M), 1972, p. 6.

18 Janaganer Birudhe Congress Santas - Ekti Pramanva Bibaran (Bengali), Calcutta: CITU(W.B.), 1972, p. 15.

the help of police force and CRP. Never before was the armed police so nakedly used to protect the interest of the employees. They shamelessly protected the criminals and anti-social gangsters to instal a reign of terror throughout the state."¹⁹

An outstanding example of the Congress Party's terror attacks against the working class and trade unions was a new plane of intensified armed police repression initiated in Durgapur in the first week of August 1970 and was intensified since then. This reign of terror and repression was let loose on the workers of the steel plant in Durgapur who legitimately protested against the government's decision to engage Central Industrial Security Force in the steel factory, virtually armed with the power to crush any form of working class movement. Subsequent to the decision of the government the industrial township had been converted into an armed camp and every democratic right of the trade unions was trampled. The CRP and hoodlums attacked the workers houses, threatening them with dire consequences. Important trade union leaders were arrested under

19 The Working Class, vol. 1, no. 1, September 1971.

Prevention of Violent Activities Act (PVA) and as soon as they were released by the court, they were rearrested under MISA. The employers hands were also strengthened by issuing them orders to take any vindictive action against the trade union leaders and any free movement was prohibited with the imposition of curfew and Section 144 in the town.²⁰

This had been the form of attack of the Congress Party against the democratic struggle of workers. Just before the elections in 1972, a large part of West Bengal was put under section 144 and even the right to hold public meetings was utterly denied. The pattern of organised attack on the working class and many other isolated incidents of massacre of individual leaders and workers of the trade unions by the Congress Party were other manifestations of its utterly authoritarian rule. Side by side with this widespread practice of violence large scale retrenchment, lockout of factories, and lay-offs were other aspects of its repression of the working class.

20 Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, Bheratia Ganatantrer Swaroop (Bengali), Calcutta: APDR, West Bengal, 1977, p. 24.

The repressive attack on the working class corresponded to the acute economic crisis which had also ushered in a serious political crisis in the Congress Party and the concomitant attempts to throttle democracy altogether. A new phase of intensified police repression and the Congress Party's policy of liquidation of leftist trade unionism were corollaries of its authoritarian rule.

Authoritarianism also involves some mass support, especially among the petty-bourgeoisie and the workers. Hence it could be argued that despite the authoritarian trends which were becoming strong in the Congress Party, there was an amount of popular support for Mrs Gandhi due to her persistent presentation of a radical image. Her policies on nationalisation of banks, 'garibi hatao', and Bangladesh further strengthened this image and gave her a broad support base among the poor. In addition, the lower middle class, anti-socials and lumpen proletariat whose support she enlisted in the youth and student Congress in West Bengal, a large section of the working class, especially the AITUC controlled by the CPI, and INTUC supported her with disastrous results for the Left movement. Infighting in the left also gave the Congress Party a handle to

provoke inter-union rivalries and thus strengthen the forces of repression. The broad anti-democratic attacks on the working class had greatly undermined the democratic character of the Congress Party and also represented yet another significant aspect of its transformation from a democratic party to an authoritarian one.

...

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters we have attempted an analysis of the broad transformation of the Congress Party from a loosely democratic party to an increasingly centralised and authoritarian party under Mrs Gandhi's leadership. We have worked on the broad hypothesis that this transformation was the consequence of an all round crisis -- economic, political and ideological in the ruling party as well as of the ruling classes which became manifest in the Indian political system since the mid 1960s. The defeat of the Congress Party in 1967 was a result of this and it further aggravated the crisis. Economically it reflected the utter failure of the Congress policy to check recession which rose to a very high scale resulting in intense misery and hardship of the people. The political crisis matured with the rise of prolonged and powerful popular movements against the Congress rule creating the possibility of developing an alternative to the Congress system, which materialized

in the form of Left rule in West Bengal. The political defeat endangered the position of the ruling classes, whose interest the Congress Party served. Ideologically also, its hegemonic role was challenged by the sway of radical and leftist ideology. 'Crisis of authority' was reached when the hegemonic role of political power was undermined. Authority tends to become more autocratic at this stage in the sense that it has to depend more on coercive methods of domination and control. Likewise the authoritarianism of the Congress Party was also a response to the crisis of its political hegemony.

However, looking at the question of transformation of the Congress Party, it can be argued that 1967 was only the beginning of the move towards centralisation of power and authority. And the process culminated in the Emergency declared in 1975. Emergency thus was only a part of the continuum in the history of India. It served to make manifest the nature of Congress rule. We discussed the more specific aspects of the transformation of the Congress Party in West Bengal in the preceding chapters under the following heads.

In the 'Introduction' we attempted a brief analysis of the nature of West Bengal politics. We had

put emphasis on the emerging forces that were responsible for the Congress's defeat in elections in 1967. The political developments since then, particularly the rapid rise and fall of United Front Governments in the state till the Congress's came back in 1972 elections has also been shown with the aim of pointing out the Congress Party's gradual consolidation of power and the strategies and tactics it followed to undermine democratic left movements in the state.

In the second chapter we discussed the Congress Party's large scale repression of popular forces through state terror and violence. It revealed itself in the massive mobilisation of the repressive state apparatus to directly serve the interest of the ruling classes and the nature of attacks on the left and democratic forces.

In the third chapter we discussed the birth and rise of Chhatra Parishad and Youth Congress, the twin pillars of Mrs Gandhi's rise to authority. Along with this, we also traced the growing lumpenisation of the Congress Party with the inclusion of a large number of anti-socials and unemployed youths who played a

decisive role in Congress's terror campaign and later on in the rigging operations in 1972.

In the fourth chapter we discussed the strategy of the Congress to disrupt the trade union and democratic struggle of the working class and employees.

The broad conclusions we have reached can be stated as follows:

The growing authoritarianism largely practiced by the Congress Party had gone hand in hand with the collusion of the party with the state machinery, violating all normal bourgeois legal norms.

The emergence of a new brand of student and youth leaders replacing the old guards together with the mobilisation of social retrogrades, unemployed and lumpen proletariats in the student and youth wing of the Congress Party had brought about a change in the party's ideology and working. This resulted in intense factionalism within the Congress followed by the consolidation of personalised rule of Mrs Gandhi. Simultaneously there had been a decisive change in the social composition of the party.

Authoritarianism of the Congress Party, especially its rise to a highly centralised and autocratic political machine under Mrs Gandhi's leadership had gone hand in

hand with her populist strategy. This had, on the one hand, given her the mass support needed to maintain the overtly democratic system and, on the other, provided her with powers to organise open attacks and violate the basic norms of democracy. This strategy was tried and succeeded in 1971 and 1972 elections. Both the elections brought back the Congress with massive votes all over the country except in West Bengal where terror and rigging became more decisive in 1972 because of its still weak and dwindling support.

However, most significant part of the transformation that we have tried to reflect in our study is that the transformation was not simply from an authoritarian party, but indeed something more profound happened. It can be noted that the strategy and tactics employed by the Congress Party to undermine democratic forces and the broad nature of state violence aided by it, bore in many ways a close resemblance with fascist form of rule. West Bengal perhaps was a test case where the authoritarian transformation of the Congress Party also had some elements of fascism in it. This holds true not only in terms of its nature of

repression, but also in terms of its social composition, that increasingly mobilised the retrograde sections of the petty-bourgeoisie and lumpen proletariat for recruiting them in the party's 'strong arm brigades'.

Though we certainly do not brand the Congress rule to be a fascist rule, but it is possible to agree with R.P. Dutt that in a narrower and specific sense we can talk about fascism in terms of fascist movements relevant to a specific situation. The characteristics underlining such fascist movements, according to him, are terrorism, extra-legal fighting formation, anti-parliamentarism, national and social demogogy etc.¹ Likewise the Congress Party's open terrorism, the same extra-legal fighting formations in the name of Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad, large scale anti-parliamentarism practised through the use of terror and rigging in the elections in West Bengal and national and social demogogy sipping through Mrs Gandhi's abounding slogans for 'garibi hatao' and socialism,

¹ R.P. Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1976, p. 76.

can also be traced as some tendencies towards fascism in their embryonic form. As we discussed the transformation of the Congress Party, it could be said that authoritarianism was simply one way of facing the crisis in West Bengal. What made West Bengal a special case was the fact that along with this authoritarianism a new experiment along a nearly fascist line had also been carried on in this state. Taken in this sense, the case of West Bengal could be understood as a forerunner of the shape of Indian politics to come especially under 'Emergency'. It also revealed clearly the real nature of the bourgeois democratic state and the state apparatus which can overnight stand against the democratic forces in the face of crisis of the ruling classes or the ruling party.

A strong weakness of the left movement as well as the failure of the CPI(M) was their inability to check the growing tendencies towards authoritarianism. The left parties, particularly the CPI(H) failed to provide the leadership to the growing mass unrest because the long and sustained repression of the Congress Party had left it weak and ineffective. Moreover, the CPI(H) also suffered from internal

weaknesses, i.e. due to its lack of organisational support on an all India basis.

It is true that the institutions which disrupted democracy grew in importance even before emergency was declared. All these reflect a transformation of the Congress Party from a broad-based party of consensus in Nehru's time to a centralised and authoritarian party under Mrs Gandhi's rule. Nevertheless the 'new political institutions' during emergency could be characterised as follows:

- (1) A growing importance of the Central Intelligence Organisation, especially the Research and Analysis Wing organised directly under Prime Minister's secretariat and Central Bureau of Investigation located in Home Ministry. Their services were increasingly utilised by Mrs Gandhi to have dossiers on government opponents.
- (2) There had been an enormous mobilisation of Central Government police forces like CRP, BSF, CISF and Home Guards to suppress and crush any democratic opposition movement.
- (3) The unprecedented expansion of Prime Minister's secretariat had enabled the emergence of Mrs

Gandhi as an independent and unchallengeable executive force.

- (4) Youth Congress and Chhatra Parishad had emerged as a militant cadre-based organisation. They emerged as a new social force that was necessary to bear the banner of Mrs Gandhi's autocracy, to act as the support base of her policies.²

However authoritarianism, which was resorted to in order to face the crisis of the ruling party and the ruling classes was in the long run unable to contain this crisis. It could not guarantee the stable hegemony of the ruling party and the ruling classes. Given the contradictions among the ruling classes this hegemony was difficult to establish. Growth of factions in the Congress Party was also another factor which further aggravated the contradictions. All these brought its defeat in 1977. There is another factor also. So long as Mrs Gandhi relies on constitutional support for her

2 Sajal Basu (ed.), Underground Literature during Indian Emergency, Calcutta, 1978; see Myron Weiner's Article, "India's New Political Institutions", pp. 186-8.

For a comparative study of emergency regimes see also Jyotirindra Dasgupta, "A Season of Caesars : Emergency Regimes and Development Politics in Asia", Asian Survey, vol. 18, no. 4, April 1978, pp. 315-49.

authoritarian rule, she will be inherently limited by her manipulative style and her use of populist ideology for political mobilisation. These show the inherent weakness and fragility of Congress Party's authoritarianism.

This strategy was tried and tested in the elections in 1977. Some thought 1977 to be a restoration of pluralism and democracy.³ However, objectively, the outcome was only too obvious considering the fact that emergency would never have ended in a military dictatorship as many expected. On the contrary, the Indian bourgeoisie was anxious to avert such possibility since that endangered its own position. And hence it was just a matter of time for the Congress Party to rule by suspending the constitution indefinitely.⁴ The result was the elections in 1977 when once again democracy was restored. But then, setting aside the intermediary years of the country's experiment with coalition

3 Harry W. Blair, "Mrs Gandhi's Emergency, the Indian Elections of 1977, Pluralism and Marxism: Problems with Paradigms", Modern Asian Studies, vol. 14, no. 2, 1980, pp. 237-71.

4 Tariq Ali, "The Fall of Congress in India", in New Left Review, no. 103, May-June 1977, p. 53.

governments, the political process since 1980 was intriguing because since then tendencies towards growing centralisation also became more manifest in Mrs Gandhi's Congress together with its relatively broader democratic frame of politics. Even though the authoritarian repression of the emergency rule had ended, the Congress rule was nonetheless highly personalised. This overtly centralised and personalised politics of the Congress Party since 1980s could then be stated to be a form of intermediary rule between the extremes of authoritarianism and democracy and is an important aspect of its transformation.

But such centralised and personalised rule of the Congress Party generates its own contradictions within the parameter of Indian politics, "particularly with complex constellation of forces within the ruling coalition".⁵ The contradictions amongst them on the one hand works for the restoration of democracy, making its survival highly unsteady at the same time.⁶ This makes the entire system essentially crisis prone. Transformation of the Congress Party is but a manifestation of this.

5 Pranab Bardhan, "Authoritarianism and Democracy : First Anniversary of New Regime", in Economic and Political Weekly, 18 March 1978, p. 531.

6 Ibid.

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