

PARTY SYSTEM AND COALITIONAL POLITICS
IN WEST BENGAL, 1967-1977

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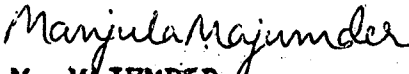
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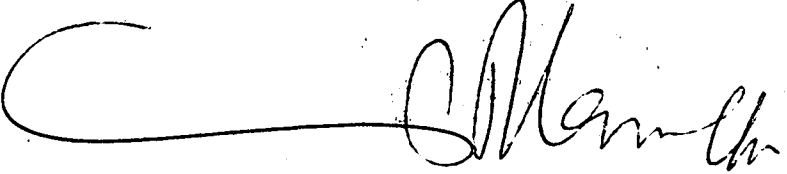
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DECLARATION

Certified that the material presented in this dissertation has not been submitted for any other diploma or degree of this or any other university.


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ABBREVIATIONS

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 1. AICC | All India Congress Committee |
| 2. AITUC | All India Trade Union Congress |
| 3. CFD | Congress For Democracy |
| 4. CITU | Centre For Indian Trade Union |
| 5. CP | Communist Party |
| 6. CPI | Communist Party of India |
| 7. CPI (ML) | Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) |
| 8. CPI (M) | Communist Party of India (Marxist) |
| 9. DMK | Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam |
| 10. LSS | Lok Sevak Sangh |
| 11. MLA | Member of Legislative Assembly |
| 12. PCC | Pradesh Congress Committee |
| 13. PDF | Progressive Democratic Front |
| 14. PSP | Fraja Socialist Party |
| 15. PULF | People's United Left Front |
| 16. RCPI | Revolutionary Communist Party of India |
| 17. RSP | Revolutionary Socialist Party |
| 18. SSP | Samyukta Socialist Party. |
| 19. SUC | Socialist Unity Centre |
| 20. UF | United Front |
| 21. ULF | United Left Front |
| 22. UTUC | United Trade Union Congress |

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INTRODUCTION

After a decade of political instability, West Bengal witnessed the formation of a Left Front coalitional government in 1977 with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in a commanding position. On the strength of its majority in the Assembly. Though it is technically designated as a Left Front coalitional Government, the CPM, is for all intents and purposes, the ruling party. The present study of West Bengal will have two foci. The first will relate to the dynamics of coalitional politics in the state. This will include a discussion of the role played by the political parties in the formation and gradual disintegration of the four coalitional Governments in the state from March 1967 to June 1977. Secondly, the study will also comprise an analysis of the policies and strategies adopted by the CPM, which contributed to the attainment of a dominating position vis-a-vis the other political parties in 1977.

POLITICAL PARTIES - A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Origin and Concept

In 1850, few countries in the world knew political parties in the modern sense of the word. Today, whether one thinks of Anglo-American democracies or totalitarian systems such as ^{the} Soviet Union or China or even developing countries like India or Ceylon, the political party in one form or another is omnipresent.

Political institutions develop out of the need

of the growing complexities of political activity. Parliaments evolved out of the King's Councils created to help the monarch deal with the intricacies of decision-making and making them more acceptable; Cabinets grew out of the complexities of Parliamentary activity.

The political party, emerges whenever the activities of a political system reach a certain degree of complexity, or whenever the notion of political power comes to include the idea that the public must participate. (1)

On the whole the development of parties seems inextricably connected with democracy, i.e. with the extension of popular suffrage and parliamentary prerogatives. "The more the right to vote is extended and multiplied, the more necessary it becomes to organize the electors by means of committees capable of making the candidates known and of canalizing the votes in their direction.²

However, these attempts at relating the evolution of national parliaments and the growth in the size of the electorate may explain the emergence of parties in established democracies of UK and the USA but not in most of the developing countries.

In the case of developing countries it is the historical

1 PALOMBARA (Joseph La) and WEINER (Myron), ed., Political Parties and Political Development, Princeton, University Press, 1966.

2 DUVERGER (Maurice), Political Parties - Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State, translated by Barbara and Robert North, London, Methuen Press, 1954.

situation of the movement from tradition to modernity and the problems that go with it which generally provide the context for the emergence of political parties. The dominant political elite on its part may seek to win public support so as to win or maintain power.

The above mentioned discussion about the origin of political parties brings us to the concept of political parties. The political party is thus a 20th century mechanism designed to solve the problem of how to bring 'the people', the new mass of voters, into the political community. It is an "agency for the organization of political power characterized by exclusively political functions, by a stable structure and inclusive membership and by the ability to dominate the contesting of election.³ The "contesting of elections" distinguishes it from other organization, organizers and intermediaries in the political process as also from the informal elites of the community, the personal clique, the fluid and restless faction and the basically non-political group - a corporation or a Church engaged in some political activity.

In the words of Apter,

...a primary function of parties is to organize public opinion and test attitudes and to transmit these to Government officials and leaders so that the rulers and the ruled, public and Government, are in reasonably close accord. From this point of view, we may see parties as intervening variables between the public and Government.

3 SORAUFF (F.J.), "The Political Party", in Joyce Gelband Marian Lief Palley, eds., Politics of Social Change, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

A second significant characteristic of political parties is that their form is determined by the entire socio-political framework of the society. They depend upon the degree of modernization in a society for their pluralism and diversity...in this sense political parties are dependent variables.

A third significant aspect of political parties is their obvious importance as subgroups in the system with their own means of generating power. In this sense the party can be identified as an independent variable. (4)

Political party is the articulate organization of society's active political agents, those who are concerned with the control of governmental power and who compete for popular support with another group or groups holding divergent views. As such it is "the great intermediary which links social forces and ideologies to official governmental institutions and related them to political action within the larger political community".⁵

From the above mentioned definition of a political party, its functions can be deduced.

In a democracy a party fulfils the two functions of organizing the chaotic public will and educating the private citizen in political responsibility besides that of representing the connecting link between Government and public opinion...but what makes parties the controlling agencies of government in a representative democracy is the fourth function of a democratic party; the selection of leaders. (6)

4 APTER (D. E.), Politics of Modernization, Chicago, University Press, 1955, pp. 181-91.

5 NEUMANN (S.), Modern Political Parties, Chicago, University Press, 1956, pp. 395-400.

6 Ibid., p. 397.

A dictatorial party plays all these roles in a very intensified form because it is the revolutionary vanguard of the future state.

The Indian Party System

The Indian party system evolved from an identifiable political "Centre" that emerged in the country in the decades before independence. The institutional expression of this Centre was the Indian National Congress, crystallized through its nation-wide organization, and identifiable in terms of its elite.⁷

The Indian party system, more or less evolved from this 'political centre' because most of the other parties, with the exception of the CPI at the national level and some regional parties like Akali Dal, DMK were formed by politicians, who had been initiated into politics under the aegis of the Congress Party. "The Congress Socialist Party was founded in 1934 but continued to work within the Congress Party upto 1948".⁸ In 1945, when it became no longer possible for socialists to organize themselves within ^{the} Congress as a Congress Socialist Party, a number of members of this party defected from ^{the} Congress to form an independent Socialist Party. Another example of a party which was formed by a political leader who had been a member of the Congress, was the Swatantra Party, founded by

7 KOTHARI (R), Politics in India, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1970.

8 CHHABRA (H. K.), State Politics in India, Delhi, Surjeet Publications, 1977.

Rajagopalachari in 1959. Bharatiya Lok Dal was formed in 1974 by the merger of several parties some of which were founded by 'defectors' from Congress, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal, the Swatantra, the Samyukta Socialist Party etc. A good example of the formation of a party at the state level by a political leader who had left the Congress Party, was the Bangla Congress. Political dissent was thus a function of fragmentation of the political centre of society rather than a projection of autonomous interests in the social and economic spheres.

India has been characterized by a multiparty system, the number of national and local political parties was fourteen and fifty-one respectively, during the first general elections. This number has kept on fluctuating since then due to the creation of new political parties. "Multiplicity and diversity make an attempt to classify Indian political parties a very hazardous undertaking.... Nevertheless, a provisional classification can be made - parties of left, parties of the right, traditional parties, regional parties, minor parties (sub-regional)".⁹

Parties of the left would include the two, Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), the Socialist Party which has undergone a series of confusing splits and mergers, till it joined the Janata Party, some factions

9 HANSON and DOUGLAS (J), India's Democracy, Delhi, Vikas Publishers, 1972, p. 79.

remaining outside. Parties of the 'right' include Swatantra, which was a spokesman of the industrialists and feudal classes till it merged into the Janata Party. Traditional parties are there that represent communal and chauvinistic interests, for example, the Jana Sangh, Muslim League, Ram Rajya Parishad.

Akali Dal, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam illustrate regional parties, the former based in Punjab, the latter in Tamil Nadu. Minor or sub-regional parties can be illustrated by Gurkha League and Lok Sevak Sangh in Bengal the former representing the interests of the hill people of Darjeeling and the latter, the economic interests of the people of Purulia, also in Bengal.

The Indian party system has been described as a single-party dominant system. Until 1967, every election confirmed the position of Congress as the dominant party. In the elections of 1952, 1957, 1962, 70 per cent or more of the Lok Sabha seats were won by Congressmen. But there was a large gap between the votes cast and seats won for e.g. in the Lok Sabha elections of 1952, Congress won 74.4 per cent of the seats on a popular vote of 45 per cent. The Congress was also not so successful in its efforts to dominate the state Assemblies. In 1952, it failed to win an overall majority in PEPSU, Travancore-Cochin, Orissa, Madras. In 1957, the party could not get majorities in Kerala and Orissa. Various reasons have been put forward by writers on Indian politics as to why the Congress was the dominant party till 1967. They can be summarized as follows:

- (a) Congress was part of the mystique of the national movement....
- (b) It was far more of a national party than most of its opponents Congress strength was nationwide.
- (c) Presence of an aggregative party at the Centre of the political spectrum left the other parties no other choice but to occupy peripheral positions. (10)

Greater competitiveness and decreasing institutionalization, was the general trend after 1967. The fourth general elections, held in February 1967, became important in the process of fragmentation of the party system, a process that turned dissidence and criticism within the party to defections outside the party. The Congress lost 95 seats in the Lok Sabha but it retained its majority; it was in the states that it received its greatest shock by failing to win majorities in Bihar, Punjab, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras and Kerala. The impact of the 1967 elections, were mainly two-fold - (i) factionalism increased within the Congress. Many Congressmen were tempted to increase their power by defecting to their party. In former days to be outside the Congress Party was to be in the political wilderness whereas in 1967, the politically ambitious had several alternatives. (ii) Bargaining inter-party coalitional politics with all its inconsistencies or uncertainties became the political trend after 1967.

Right and left parties would combine or oppose each other as advantages dictated. With the Congress split, both successors were now drawn

into this politics of manoeuvre. Kaleidoscopic changes and strange alliances came to be every day occurrences. (11)

The party system apparently reverted to the single party dominant system in 1971 when Mrs. Gandhi's Congress swept the Lok Sabha Polls. From 1971 to 1977, especially from 1975 to 1977, when a period of 'emergency' was declared, the opposition parties were again relegated to the periphery of the political system. But, in the Lok Sabha polls of 1977, Mrs. Gandhi's Congress received a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Janata Party, which ruled for 2 years, till it split into Janata (Jagjivan Ram) and Janata (Secular) or Lok Dal, with the latter leading a minority caretaker Government in the state. The Congress Party split a second time, one faction being led by Mrs. Gandhi and the other by Swaran Singh and Devraj Urs. Fragmentation of the Indian party has been the unchanged trend after 1967.

COALITIONAL POLITICS - A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The term coalition is derived from the word 'coalito' which means to coalesce. In the political sense, the word coalition is used for an alliance or temporary union for joint action of various powers or states and also of the Union into a single Government of distinct parties.

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- 11 MORRIS-JONES (W.H.), The Government and Politics of India, New Delhi, B.I. Publication, 1974, p. 213.
- 12 SAHNI (N.C.), Coalition Politics and India, Jullundur, New Academic Publishers, 1970, p. 18.

Ogg defines coalition as "a cooperative arrangement under which distinct political parties, or at all events, members of such parties unite to form a Government or ministry." 13

Riker defines coalition as a parliamentary or a political grouping less permanent than a party or a faction or an interest group. 14

The following generalizations can be implied from the above mentioned definitions.

- (1) Coalitions are formed for the sake of some reward, material or psychic. The partners combine together to win the game in order to have material reward for their labours. However it is not possible for every partner to gain materially under all circumstances, gains may be of a psychic nature. There may be a situation when a party is willing to "forego material reward for the sake of obtaining the psychic reward of leadership". 15 This was the case of the Bangla Congress in West Bengal during the 1967 and 1969 ministry making.
- (ii) Secondly, if the partners are more than two, some of them may go to the length of behaving like negotiators or mediators, whose concern is to draw advantage out of the obtaining situation.

13 OGG (F.A.), 'Coalition' in Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, New York, Macmillan, 1957, p. 600.

14 RIKER (W.H.), The Theory of Political Coalitions, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962, p. 524.

15 Ibid., p. 529.

(iii) The underlying principles of a coalition system stands on the simple fact of temporary conjunction of specific interests. As a result of tugs and pulls, a point of equilibrium is arrived at where the actors agree to lay down their arms to have their united strength for the realization of their goal, however limited it may be.

(iv) Coalition politics is not a static but a dynamic affair. Coalitional adjustments ever pass through the process of growth and decay. Newer issues come up to demand newer adjustments creating newer sets of autonomous factions in a way compelling the constituent partners to revise the existing scheme of adjustment from time to time according to the exigencies of the situation. Thus, a coalition should never be treated as a fixed tableau.

It is generally accepted that a coalitional government suffers from inherent instability. The degree of instability will, however, vary in proportion to the impact of various forces. Thus, coalitions of parties with contradictory political orientation and programme will be less stable. The parties at the extremes viz. Jana Sangh and Communist Party of India may come together in a coalition as they did in Bihar, U.P. and Punjab, but their alignments were short lived. This is more valid for the Centre where ideological orientation plays a more critical role than in the states.

Stability of coalitions will depend on:

- (a) Coalition partners' ability to evolve satisfactory arrangements for allocation of power.

- (b) Number of political parties participating in the elections. As a general rule, the number of equally balanced political parties, the more unstable the coalition.
 - (c) When one of the parties holding the dominant position behaves with restraint, where the interests of the minor coalition partners are concerned.
 - (d) When coalition is of different parties, presence of an acceptable leader with mass appeal will help stability of coalition. (16)
- (v) In any coalition, the values, goals and policies are the result of a bargaining process. Although the dominant partner in the coalition exercises a certain amount of authority to determine the goals, values and policies of the coalition, the minority partners also have opportunities to influence them. In the intraparty coalition, consensus tends to become the accepted method of conflict resolution and, in the final analysis, the call of party unity works. On the other hand, in an inter-party coalition, since the parties do not have common leadership, common programmes and common memories, the emphasis is on bargaining as the method of decision-making.

Coalitional politics can be typical of three types of political situations.

The inability of any single party, in a multiparty system to form a ministry by commanding a working majority in the lower House of Parliament, in a bi-cameral legislature, can

16 MAHESHWARI (B.L.), "Politics of Coalitions, Trends for the Seventies", Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, vol. V, nos. 3, 4, 5, January 1970.

lead to the formation of a coalitional Government.

The existence of a deadlock between two parties in a predominantly biparty system, an even balance between the parties, may lead one or the other to ally themselves with any minor group such as neutrals or defectors.

Lastly, 'a national crisis necessitating the suspension of party strife and the concentration of all forces in a common direction for the common safety'.¹⁷ Paul Brass, identifies four main considerations and tendencies which influenced decisions to form coalitions (a) popular demand for such coalition, (b) ability of the parties to formulate minimum common programme, (c) pragmatic and accommodative tendencies in parties and (d) recognition of the need to adjust to regional considerations.¹⁸

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study of politics in West Bengal seeks to describe and analyze the dynamics of coalitional politics in the state. The ten year period between 1967 and 1977, has witnessed the arrival and exit of four coalitional governments as shown in the figure below, before 1977 finally the Left Front coalition. The study of West Bengal, in the context of coalitional politics is of a particular relevance because the

17 SAHNI (N.C.), op. cit., p. 115.

18 BRASS (Paul), "Coalition Politics in North India", in American Political Science Review, December 1968, pp. 1174-91.

FIGURE 1

COALITIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN WEST BENGAL

Dates	Government	Participants
March 1967-November 1967	First United Front coalition	CPM, CPI, Bangla Congress
November 1967-January 1968	P.D.F., Congress Coalition	P.D.F., Congress
January 1968-February 1969	Second United Front coalition	CPM, CPI, Bangla Congress
March 1971-April 1971	Congress Coalition	Congress, Bangla Congress
April 1971-March 1972	President's Rule	Governor appointed by Central Government Congress
March 1972-June 1977	Congress	Congress
June 1977-Present	Left Front coalition	CPM, Forward Bloc(M), RSP, RCPI

coalition partners belonged to a broad spectrum of ideological affiliations from the Bangla Congress at one end to the Communist Party (Marxist) at the other. The CPM in 1967 was determined not to forsake the 'revolutionary struggles' of the working class (urban and rural) and even went as far to state that it was not interested, in participation in government so as much as to revolutionalize the masses and gave an impetus to revolutionary movements. Thus, the tenures of the two United Fronts witnessed peasant upsurges,^a high incidence of gheraos, labour unrest, rural and urban political violence.

The Centre's reaction to the above mentioned developments, have been seen in the context of the strategic importance of West Bengal, and also its importance as an important industrial centre in the country. An attempt has also been made to enquire into the strategies and policies adopted by the CPM, which helped it to establish its political dominance vis-a-vis other political parties.

General Outline

The dissertation is divided into four chapters followed by a chapter containing the conclusions of the study. The first chapter entitled 'The Socio-Economic, Political Environment in West Bengal' is a general account of the socio-economic political structures prevailing in the state, the aim being to link them with political unorthodoxy, as symbolized by the state's tradition of leftism. The second chapter entitled 'The ^{Tenure of the} First United Front Government (1967)', analyzes the various issues that confronted the ministry, the inherent, ideological and Centre-state contradictions that contributed to the gradual undermining and final collapse of the coalitional experiment.

In the third chapter entitled 'President's Rule and the Second United Front (1968-1970)', an attempt has been made to analyze the inherent, ideological and Centre-state contradictions that eroded the stability and 'unity' of the second United Front Government. An attempt has also been made to study the CPM's role in this period and account for its

political isolation between 1970 and 1977.

The fourth chapter entitled 'Retreat and Rebirth of the CPM (1970-1977)', studies the period between the President's Rule imposed after the collapse of the second United Front coalitional experiment (March 1970) and the resurgence and rebirth of the CPM in 1977. It includes a discussion of the two elections in 1971, 1972, the Congress Party's tenure in office, the CPM's role in this intervening period, i.e. the mobilization of peasants and workers, under the constraints of semi-legal conditions, and the final comeback of the party after the 1972 Assembly polls. This chapter covers the political implications of the CPM led Left Front Government.

Sources of Data

This study is based on secondary source material. The latter includes memoranda, government documents, party pamphlets, party manifestoes, already existing studies, journals and newspapers.

Chapter I

SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IN WEST BENGAL

West Bengal provides an interesting study of a state in which the political convulsions and turbulence of the late sixties can be linked with the political-social-economic structure in existence. Feelings of alienation and deprivation generated from the fabric of a crumbling and derelict social, political, economic structure, contributed to the consolidation of the social base of communism in Bengal. In such a situation, the Bengalis felt that they were beset by many enemies and so responded favourably to the communist parties (as the steady improvement of the CPs, particularly the CPMs electoral performance shows), because they promised deliverance from the crushing demands of an unjust order. A long tradition of radicalism, terrorist violence, and humiliation at being bypassed, has made Bengal, the storm-centre of Indian leftism.

Section A. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

The social structure in Bengal reflects the peculiar history of the province. An enunciation of the various characteristics of the social system will help us to understand as to why Bengal provided fertile soil for the development of political unorthodoxy:

1. Social Structure

Caste restrictions in Bengal are not as severe as in

the rest of the country. Bengal always remained peripheral to the imperial consolidation of the earlier Hindu and Moghul period. The Bengalis were able to exploit the favours of geography - the inaccessibility and fertility of the land -
 1
 to adopt to the conquerors on their own terms.

In the last 600 years, Bengal saw a mushrooming of a number of sects e.g. Sahajiya, Nath, Baul etc., movements like the Bhakti movement, societies like the Brahma Samaj and spiritual teachers like Ramakrishna Paramhans and Vivekananda who combined to dilute Brahmanic orthodoxy in Bengal. 'An offshoot of these religious movements were the terrorist organizations that were formed after the death of Vivekananda and were supported by Aurobindo Ghosh and Bhupendra Nath'.
 2
 This in turn were the predecessors of the Marxist left parties, which were formed in the nineteen-thirties.

Another characteristic of the social structure is the diversity of population.

The majority is Hindu, but the Muslims are most numerous among the minority groups, only Uttar Pradesh has more Muslims than Bengal. Their presence in Bengal can be explained by the proselytizing activities of the Pathan-Afghan-Mughal conquerors who ruled in Bengal from the 13th century till their

1 ADDY (Premen) and AZAD (Ibne), "Politics and Society in Bengal in Robin Blackburn, ed., Explosion on a Subcontinent, London, Cox and Wyman, 1975, p. 80.

2 BOSE (Nemai Sadhan), The Indian Awakening and Bengal, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960, p. 190.

subjugation by the British. The much maligned component of the social system is the lower-caste Hindus, or 'Scheduled castes' who are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy.

The two minority communities are the tribals and non-Bengali Hindus who had migrated to Bengal after the introduction of British rule. Most of these people came from Bihar, Orissa, Eastern Uttar Pradesh to work as factory owners or labourers in Bengal. 'The reasons for this exodus of people from neighbouring states is the need to supplement their incomes as the wages are the lowest in Bihar, Orissa, while in Bengal, it is the highest'.³

Last of all, are the small and influential minority of people from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, who control major business activities in the state. The population of West Bengal, viewed from a class perspective, can be split up into the rich upper class, who are mainly engaged in business and commerce, the middle class or the professionals, the urban and rural working class.

The upper class are mainly non-Bengali. After Permanent Settlement was introduced in Bengal in the eighteenth century, investment in land became a profitable venture. The educated Bengalis drifted to zamindari and into that vacuum, drifted the non-Bengali business interests. 'After the first World War, Calcutta had become the centre of political agitation, so the British commercial classes began replacing their

TABLE 1

SOCIAL CONFIGURATIONS IN WEST BENGAL

Religion	Number, 1951	Number, 1961
Hindu	19,462,706 (78.45%)	27,542,794 (78.92%)
Muslim	4,925,496 (19.85%)	6,971,287 (19.98%)
Other	422,106 (1.70%)	383,198 (1.10%)
Totals	24,810,308 (100.0%)	34,897,279 (100.0%)

Language (Mother Tongue)	Number, 1951
Bengali	20,994,379 (84.62%)
Hindi	1,574,786 (6.34%)
Santhali	663,503 (2.67%)
Urdu	457,636 (1.84%)
Oriya	182,271 (0.78%)
Nepali	174,017 (0.75%)
Other	763,722 (3.00%)
Total	24,810,308 (100.0%)

Source: FRANDA (Marcus), Political Development and Political Decay in Bengal, Calcutta, 1971, p. 5.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF BENGALI AND NON-BENGALI LABOUR
EMPLOYED IN WEST BENGAL

State	1964	1965	1966	1967
West Bengal	43.18	40.90	42.70	41.40
Bihar	26.74	27.18	27.52	27.71
Uttar Pradesh	16.49	16.95	17.65	18.51
Orissa	6.93	7.00	6.61	6.32
Madhya Pradesh	1.23	1.14	1.27	1.41
East Pakistan	0.99	0.54	0.07	0.05
Other States	4.44	0.29	4.18	4.60

Source: GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State: A Study of West Bengal, 1967-70, Orient Longman, 1971, p. 32.

Bengali employees by Rajasthanis. After transfer of power, many British commercial houses passed into their hands'.⁴

The middle class in Bengal is predominantly Bengali. The term 'middle class' denotes those people who have at least a secondary education who do not do manual labour, but who depend on occupational earnings for their livelihood'.⁵ The

4 GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State: A Study of West Bengal, 1967-70, Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1971, p. 24.

5 For further details, see Bhabani Sengupta, Communism in Indian Politics, New Delhi: Young Asia Publication, 1978, p. 140.

Bengali middle classes' preoccupation with nonmaterialistic interests, ultimately doomed them into exclusion from power. In the words of Toynbee, "the liquidation of the British Raj in India...has been followed by a scramble of power...the 20th century winner is the Gujarati with his commonsense".⁶

The lowest classes are the urban and rural working classes. The urban working class comprise the factory workers, workers at construction sites, household manuals etc. The rural working class are the sharecroppers, the landless labourers or the small peasants whose size of landholdings is under 5 acres. Needless to say that 62.98 per cent of the landholdings in Bengal are below 5 acres.

2. Economic Structure

The economic structure of West Bengal can be linked with the feelings of alienation that the Bengalis have harboured against the Centre and industrial classes who hold the economic reins in the state.

Agriculture in Bengal has traditionally been organized by peasant families occupying small landholdings. The Permanent Settlement in 1765 placed the rights of proprietorship with the tax collector or zamindar and with one strike destroyed peasant ownership. From this position of tax payers to the state, they were reduced to being tenant farmers and payers of rent.

When independence came in 1947, most of the fertile rice-growing districts went to East Pakistan, leaving West Bengal with a huge food deficit. The jute growing areas also were included in East Pakistan and thus Bengal was forced to grow jute to feed its jute mills. The areas under jute in West Bengal rose from 2.66 lakh hectares in 1947-48 to 11.44 lakh hectares in 1961-62.

Apart from the threat of perpetual food deficit that characterize agriculture in West Bengal, its style is predominantly feudal. Large landlords of West Bengal lease out a considerable proportion of land to small farmers against a high rent share of 50 per cent of the produce. Sharecropping which involves more than 30 per cent of the total agricultural work-force and more than 40 per cent of the total arable land continue to be the prevalent mode of tenancy-farming in West Bengal.

Rack-renting and usurious money-lending and speculative trade are the principal methods of the rural rich for appropriation of a substantial part of the surplus coming from agricultural production.

The surplus thus appropriated, instead of being invested for expanding the productive opportunities in the agricultural sphere, is used by the rural rich mainly for the maintenance and consolidation of precapitalistic trade-cum-financial

TABLE 3

LANDHOLDINGS IN WEST BENGAL AND ALL-INDIA

Size of holdings	West Bengal	All India	West Bengal	All India
	Number of landholders	Per cent	Per cent	Number of acres
Under 5 acres	2,368,000	74	62.98	5,114,000
5 to 10 acres	601,000	18.88	18.2	4,128,000
10 to 15 acres	170,000	5.31	8	2,001,000
15 to 30 acres	53,000	1.65	7.18	1,033,000
Over 30 acres	3,000	.09	3.39	133,000

Source: Drawn from National Sample Survey, 16th Round
Draft Report No. 122, New Delhi, 158.

instruments of exploitation and partly for conspicuous consumption. (8)

Statistics, drawn by the Census of India, West Bengal, 1951, 1961, 1971 shows the gradual impoverishment and increase in the numbers of the agricultural labour force in West Bengal. Lack of irrigation facilities and lack of availability of cultivable land have also crippled agricultural productivity in West Bengal. The limits to cultivable land was reached long ago, so the only key to increased efficiency would be intensive agriculture which would require irrigation facilities, mechanization and electrification. West Bengal has lagged behind states like Punjab, Kerala and Haryana in all respects.⁹

Rural indebtedness is another factor that has contributed to make the life of the Indian peasant unbearable. 57 per cent of the rural labour in West Bengal is in a state of perpetual indebtedness.

The failure of land reform measures is another established fact. The land ceiling laws do not deter the land-owning classes from benami transactions. The steady deterioration of the conditions found an echo in the peasant movements that swept the countryside after the formation of the second

8 BISWAS (Arabinda) and BANNERJEE (Nripen), "Problems of Labour and Enterprise in West Bengal Agriculture: A Regional Study", in Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 6/7, January-February 1978, p. 40.

9 For an elaboration of this point see ROYCHOWDHURI (Prafulla), West Bengal: A Decade (1965-75), Calcutta, Boipatra Publishers, 1977, p. 32.

TABLE 4

SOME SELECTED INDICATORS RELATED TO AGRICULTURE

Districts	Agricultural Labourers as % of Rural Work-force			Scheduled Population as % of Rural Population		Literates as percent of Rural Population	Land-Man Ratio (Acres)	Cropping Intensity	Per Acre Value of Production (Rs.)		
	1951	1961	1971	Tribes	Castes				Food	Non-food	Average
24 Parganas	21.88	25.99	41.79	2.35	31.64	28.73	0.30	1.15	691	1858	791
Nadia	16.14	19.76	32.23	1.63	24.06	25.07	0.39	1.73	557	2409	1007
Murshidabad	20.32	21.17	38.33	1.41	12.36	17.29	0.33	1.80	640	2086	916
Burdwan	22.12	21.65	38.12	7.22	28.80	29.07	0.38	1.22	968	4632	1198
Birbhum	31.20	32.31	44.19	7.49	30.65	25.01	0.50	1.38	874	6714	1105
Bankura	27.52	25.95	41.84	11.06	28.93	24.75	0.50	1.08	910	3581	1002
Midnapur	17.95	21.45	36.08	3.57	13.98	31.31	0.42	1.16	774	3909	886
Hooghly	23.00	26.92	40.83	4.53	26.64	33.29	0.25	1.44	991	3078	1375
Howrah	16.37	17.83	37.36	0.14	18.04	32.24	0.14	1.34	888	2886	1071
Jalpaiguri	1.22	3.05	10.83	22.00	36.02	20.62	0.47	1.05	747	1048	797
Malda	15.32	14.88	35.19	8.46	16.96	15.81	0.42	1.60	512	1114	598
W. Dinajpur	13.55	22.27	29.19	12.98	24.76	18.66	0.70	1.36	633	3456	800
Coochbehar	9.86	7.54	16.60	0.79	49.82	19.23	0.52	1.23	718	1032	779
Purulia	NA	14.05	35.55	21.18	14.77	19.22	0.47	1.14	636	1916	685

Source: BISWAS and BANNERJEE, "Problems of Land and Enterprise in West Bengal", in Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 6/7, p. 38.

united front in 1969. From the middle of 1967 till the end of 1969, the government had recovered 3 lakh acres of benami land'.¹⁰ (See Tables 5 and 6)

Industry in Bengal was flourishing during the early eighteenth century. The political dominance of the British was synonymous with deliberate policies to kill Bengal's industrial growth. Bengal was converted into an agricultural hinterland for the British Empire.

After the British consolidated their power in Bengal, Marwaris from Rajasthan, emigrated to Bengal in large numbers. They made tremendous fortunes in commerce and after transfer of power, many of them bought up British-owned industrial establishments. But, they did not change the manner of productivity or the structure of industries. Moreover, they were more interested in trade and commerce than in industry.

The three major industries of pre-and-post-Independent Bengal are jute, tea and engineering goods, employing about 90 per cent of the industrial labour force.

West Bengal had started with an advantageous position in 1947. She had the highest per capita income in the country. With the exception of Bombay, West Bengal's net domestic product in 1950 was higher than any other state. In industrial production, West Bengal was slightly behind Maharashtra but made up for this drawback in the field of trade and

10 GHOSH (Ranjan) and NAGARAJ (K.), "Land Reforms in West Bengal" in Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 6/7, January-February 1978, p. 57.

TABLE 5

LANDHOLDINGS IN WEST BENGAL, LAND AVAILABLE FOR DISTRIBUTION

Size of holding	Number of landholders	Total acres of possession	Acres allowed to be retained	Acres available for distribution
Over 33½ acres	20,000	1,000,000	700,000 (ceiling: 33½)	300,000
Over 25 acres	40,000	1,600,000	1,000,000 (ceiling: 25)	600,000
Over 20 acres	60,000	2,300,000	1,350,000 (ceiling: 20)	950,000
Over 15 acres	120,000	3,200,000	900,000 (ceiling: 15)	2,300,000

Source: SEN (Bhowani), Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India, New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1962, p. 201.

TABLE 6

AREA DECLARED SURPLUS, TAKEN POSSESSION OF AND AREA
DISTRIBUTED (LAKHS OF ACRES)

Period	Agri. land vested	Area Taken Possession	Area dis- tributed	Number of Families which got land
Upto 1967	3.37	NA	NA	NA
1967-1970	3.43	NA	2.32	2.38
Upto May 1972	9.25	7.02	3.67	NA
1972 to January 1976	0.47	0.32	0.21	NA
Upto April 1976	10.25	8.56	6.20	8.47

Source: GHOSH (Nagaraj), "Land Reforms in West Bengal", in Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 6/7, p. 58.

commerce in which West Bengal had a pre-eminent position. According to the Government of India's Census of Manufacturing Industries, 1951, Bengal had the highest number of registered factories - 1, 493.¹¹

All these advantages could not prevent the decline of West Bengal after independence. In per capita income, West Bengal maintained her first position till 1955 but by 1961 came down to second place. Every state, other than West Bengal and Assam, recorded an increase between 1950 and 1960. By 1965-66 it came down to seventh position, after Punjab, Maharashtra, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Assam.

TABLE 7

ECONOMIC PICTURE OF STATES IN 1950

States	Net domestic product in 1950-51 at 1960-61 prices	Percentage distribution
West Bengal	12,39,82	11.6
Maharashtra	11,94,83	11.2
Tamil Nadu	7,37,13	6.9
Gujarat	6,19,64	5.8
Bihar	7,00,41	6.6
Punjab-Haryana	6,52,54	6.1
Uttar Pradesh	17,10,22	16.1

Source: ROY (Ranajit), The Agony of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1971, p. 29.

11 ROY (Ranajit), The Agony of West Bengal, Calcutta: New Age Publishers, 1971, pp. 28-29.

TABLE 8

ECONOMIC PICTURE OF STATES IN 1960-61

States	Net Domestic Product (in Rs. lakhs) at 1960-61 prices	Percentage increase in 1960-61 over 1950-51
West Bengal	16,13,08	30.3
Maharashtra	18,96,12	58.7
Tamil Nadu	11,58,12	57.1
Punjab-Haryana	8,96,16	37.3
Bihar	10,31,37	47.3
Gujarat	8,31,08	34.1
India	147,43,78	38.3

Source: ROY (Ranajit), The Agony of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1971, p. 31.

The ills that threaten industry in Bengal are manifold.

Firstly, they are subjected to demands which are external to the state. The jute and tea industries are vulnerable to foreign pressure. The engineering industry had to suffer mainly because of lack of orders from the various governmental departments, including Railways. A recession in the country or a government decision to cut back orders as a measure for checking inflation would certainly affect the engineering industry in the state.

Secondly, lack of modernization and diversification are other drawbacks. High cost of production and recession

are the results.

Thirdly, there is a lack of interest in production among the industrialists in Bengal. They are more interested in making money in the blackmarket than in engaging their time and resources in the task of production.

Fourthly, development of infrastructure has been extremely meagre. Most of the all weather roads and railways are concentrated in a few districts. The power crisis, a regular feature in West Bengal, due to the extremely tardy development of the generating capacity in the entire post-independence period.

Fifthly, the state has been a little unfortunate in as far as financial assistance from the Centre and financial agencies is concerned. The Central Government's policy can be understood by a perusal of the size of the Plans.

West Bengal's First Plan was of the size of Rs.154 crores and that of Maharashtra and Gujarat together was Rs.224 crores. During the Second Plan, West Bengal had a Plan of Rs.145 crores, as against Rs.350 crores of Maharashtra and Gujarat. During the Third Plan Bengal managed a Plan of Rs.250 crores while Maharashtra had a Plan of Rs.390 crores and Gujarat of Rs.235 crores. In the Fourth Plan, West Bengal had an outlay of Rs.322 crores while Maharashtra (Rs.848 crores) and Gujarat (Rs.455 crores) together had Rs.1,353 crores. (12)

In the matter of private sector investment and assistance from various public financial agencies, West Bengal's share has been meagre. Except for the Industrial Finance Corporation, all these institutions have their headquarters in

Bombay, for e.g., the Reserve Bank, the State Bank, the Life Insurance Corporation, the Industrial Development Bank, the Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation, and the Unit Trust. Investment made by the Industrial Development Bank between 1964 and 1970, amounted to Rs.118.80 crores in Maharashtra, Rs.43 crores for Gujarat, Rs.41.79 crores in West Bengal.¹³

Section B. POLITICAL PARTIES IN WEST BENGAL

The political fabric of West Bengal^{is} a multi-coloured one. Since 1947, political parties with 'right' and 'left' affiliations have existed in Bengal. They can be placed in 3 categories: (i) Congress, Bangla Congress. (ii) Communist Party till 1964, later the CPI, CPM and CPI (ML), and other leftist parties. (iii) minor parties like PSP, Jana Sangh, Hindu Mahasabha, Gorkha League, Lok Sevak Sangh, whose influence has been temporary or sub-regional in character.

1. Indian National Congress

For twenty years after independence, from 1947 to 1967, the Congress Party held its sway over Bengal. The roots of the Congress Party can be traced to the political-social-cultural resurgence in the nineteenth century Bengal. The first Congress President was a Bengali and Bengalis were prominent among the moderates who led the Congress in its infant stages.

From the 1920s, the dominance of the Bengalis in the Congress deteriorated a great deal due to the advent of Gandhi. Gandhi's political style was held in contempt by the westernized urban intellectuals who dominated the Congress Party in Bengal. Marcus Franda has enumerated some of the sources of the dispute which was to have repercussions on the relations between Bengal and the Indian Union after independence.

- (i) In part it was a struggle over the methods to be used in the nationalist movement. The Bengali leadership were constantly prodding Gandhi and the Congress Party to move faster and to intensify its activities.
- (ii) The westernized urban intellectuals explained what Bose called "a rationalist revolt against the Mahatma and his philosophy".
- (iii) Gandhi had little feel for the problems of the urban middle class. His main concern was with the rural areas and his attention was focused primarily on programmes...which provided little satisfaction to a class which was most concerned with the extension of education and the opportunities for professional and government jobs. (14)

Apart from the above mentioned causes, it was a dispute between classes. The rising industrial class and peasantry threw their weight behind Gandhi and confronted the urbanized professional class of Bengal who till then claimed to hold the key to progress. But the initiative had already passed out of the latter's hands.

The bhadralok or the urbanized professional neither formed part of the new industrial bourgeoisie. Composed mainly of the Marwaris,

14 FRANDA (Marcus), Political Development and Political Decay in Bengal, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1971, p. 32.

Gujaratis and Sindhis - nor participated in the labour which generated their capital. Their 'middle class' position was to limit their social vision and so impede their political development...they ultimately failed to mount a radical challenge and transform Bengali society. (15)

Under the existing circumstances, the Chittaranjan Das-Gandhi and Subhas Bose-Gandhi disputes could have had but one result. Both left the party and formed their own parties - the Swaraj Party and Forward Bloc respectively with the advent of independence and the removal of the urban coalition, the Congress Party in West Bengal was faced with a political vacuum. The Congress High Command's attempt to impose Prafulla Ghosh's leadership on the West Bengal PCC failed. In 1948, Dr. B.C. Roy emerged victorious in the struggle for chiefministership - the former maintained his dominant position till his death in 1962.

P.C. Sen, the man who succeeded Roy could not match the latter in mass appeal and administrative ability. The political balance between the two dominant political groups, the Tamruk and Arambagh, disintegrated in the last days before the 1967 elections. The state was convulsed by a series of food riots, to control which, the state was turned into a police state. The opposition leaders were in jail and almost everywhere, the dominant mood was anger against the government.

The electoral performance of the Congress Party in the

first three elections had been very encouraging. It won all 3 general elections, in each case winning more than 60 per cent of the seats in both the Legislative Assembly and the Lok Sabha. The number of seats had been on the increase while the percentage of the vote had jumped from 38.9 per cent in 1952 to 46.1 per cent in 1957 to 47.3 per cent in 1962'.¹⁶

Myron Weiner's study of the social base of the Congress leadership indicates that the latter are recruited from the upper class in Bengal.

Most Congressmen (77 per cent of Weiner's sample) are employed members of their localities, in a wide variety of occupations carrying on political work on a part-time basis. 32 per cent of the Congressmen are in business and commerce or are landlords. The vast majority of Congressmen are deeply involved in local government, local civic activities and various caste, religious and tribal bodies.... (17)

The Congress Party's style of functioning has been that of a mediator, trying to keep a balance between the various segments of society. Its operational base comprised industrialists, rich landowners, panchayat officials, shopkeepers, traders, minorities. Franda, in his study of West Bengal politics, showed that "Congress was able to win the first 3 general elections in West Bengal, because of its success in

16 FRANDA (Marcus), op. cit., p. 35.

17 WEINER (Myron), "Changing Patterns of Political Leadership in West Bengal", in Political Change in South Asia, Calcutta; Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963, pp. 177-227.

putting together a coalition of urban businessmen, influential¹⁸ people and rural leaders from a variety of social groups".

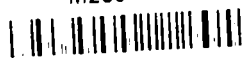
In this context, he specifically mentions the state's food production and distribution network, large and small landholders, mill-owners, the transport industry and a host of¹⁹ shopkeepers and merchants.

The Congress Party's policy of maintenance of the status quo can be discerned in its relations with major interest groups. In the trade union field, the Congress' Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), has always served the interests of the big industrial magnates. It supported the government policy of compulsory arbitration in industrial disputes embodied in the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 and has staunchly avoided strikes. Similarly, the Congress Party has looked the other way on the matter of non-implementation of land reforms. Land reforms in West Bengal were postponed until 1954 and when it was introduced, it promised substantial compensation. Moreover, the loopholes in the Land Reforms Act were taken advantage of, in the form of benami transactions and other ingenuous methods of evasions. The panchayat elections were delayed till 1956, so that the rural interests could entrench themselves more solidly and prepare for the elections. As in other states, the Congress Party in West Bengal has fought shy of taxing

18 FRANDA (Marcus), Radical Parties in West Bengal, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, M.I.T. Press, 1971, p. 33.

19 Ibid., p. 136.

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the rural rich. The Congress Party has also fought shy of organizing the landless labourers. The policy has been to maintain its influence in the countryside through its links with the rural rich.

The Congress Party has been wary of students as a political force and efforts had been made to depoliticise the student community. Till 1954, the Congress Party in Bengal did not have a student organization. On 25th August, the Youth Congress (Chatra Parishad) was formed with Atulya Ghosh's patronage. But, it could not make its presence felt in the various educational institutions. Efforts were made to keep it in the background.

In the sixties, Bengal was reeling under the impact of the two wars and the resultant economic hardships. The left-ist student organizations jumped into the fray and strikes, hartals were the order of the day. 'The Chatra Parishad played an active role as an instrument to defend the status quo, in the name of saving education'.²⁰

Another aspect of the Congress Party's political strategy in Bengal was that it operated an 'extensive patronage system which ensured its dominance for nearly two decades in that highly volatile state'.²¹ To influential men who had vote catching capacities it offered administrative rewards,

20 CHAKRAVARTI (Shyamal Kumar), Youth Congress - Achievements and Chaos, Calcutta, Anand Publishers, 1978, pp. 2-3.

21 TIMES OF INDIA, June 3, 1967.

influence with ministers, seats in Parliament or the Assembly or even a ministry. Besides, when it was in power, it had jobs to distribute, from peons to office secretaries, due to its influence in the administration, in schools, colleges, private and public business concerns. Such a system proves inadequate when the party is no longer in power and such was the fate of the Congress in the late sixties.

2. Bangla Congress

The political collaboration of Arambagh and Tamluk groups was a salient feature in Bengali Congress politics since 1921. This alliance brought a measure of stability which was the envy of other states. Trouble started in 1965, between Ajoy Mukherji, the leader of the Tamluk group and the President of the Bengali PCC and Atulya Ghosh, the Arambagh leader. It was actually a tussle between both groups for control of the organization, though the issue of corruption was claimed to be the deciding factor. Ajoy Mukherji was compelled to resign from the Presidentship and was ignored when he went to attend the AICC session. On February 6, 1966, he announced the formation of the Bangla Congress, making it clear that he had no dispute with the ideology of the Congress. Though scoffed at by the Congress and the Communist parties, it proved its vote getting capacity in the 1967 elections and was played a major political role in the period under study.

The success of the breakaway Bangla Congress can be partially explained by the support it received from the small,

middle and big farmers due to its opposition to the Congress's food policy. P.C. Sen, unwisely tried to introduce a stronger procurement policy and streamline the distribution system. But, he could not isolate the minority of rich producers who also control processing and trade, the combination of rich producers - mahajans-traders-speculators did not have any difficulty in disrupting his policy. The party which gained due to this type of disruption of the traditional Congress support base, was the Bangla Congress. It was not at all a matter of surprise that the breakaway Bangla Congress, with its opposition to the Congress food policy, made impressive gains in the rice growing districts. Because of its appeal to influentials engaged in production and distribution of foodgrains, the Bangla Congress has been most successful in rice and wheat surplus areas like Midnapore, Bankura and portions of Nadia.

3. Communist Party of India

The Indian Communist Party was created by the Comintern in 1924. Its members were usually self-converted Marxists or fugitives from British justice. From 1924 till the beginning of the Second World War, it functioned alongside the Indian National Congress. At first the Communist Party opposed the war as imperialist but the involvement of Communist Russia in the war and Japanese advances in South Asia made them change their tactical line in favour of the British war effort. The result was that the communists alienated the Congress Party and many of their supporters who consider it to be a 'foreign party'.

After 1947, the CPI was confronted with a dilemma. It had to decide whether it was to seek its legitimacy within the Indian political system or to conform to the dictates and needs of international communism. The CPI tried to do both. According to Bhabani Sengupta,

The party's history during 1939-51 is marked by two interacting trends - independence and submission to external direction. On each crucial occasion, the party first acted on its own and then reversed its tactical line under external direction. The cumulative result of the experience was the emergence of 2 distinct trends - those who wished to assert the independence of the party and those who preferred to follow the international line laid down by Moscow. (22)

The advent of independence saw the communists identifying themselves with Indian nationalism. It decided that Nehru was the progressive force among the otherwise reactionary bourgeoisie and that its support was needed to build a strong India. But the outbreak of the cold war between the Russian and Western blocs undermined the tactical line. The 'insurrectionary' line had 2 chief opponents - Ranadive and Rajeshwar Rao. Ranadive proposed strikes by the urban proletariat, which, as he calculated, would lead to a general insurrection. Rajeshwar Rao was in favour of guerrilla warfare in the countryside of the Maoist type. Numerous instances of bank robberies, train robberies, bomb and acid bulb attacks at public meetings, looting, destruction of factory equipment and murders of police, rival labour organizers, and other

'enemies', were attributed to the CPI in Bengal. As a result of these activities, the party was banned in West Bengal and a number of Bengali communists were arrested.

The result was that by 1950, the CPI was paralyzed and its membership depleted from 100,000 to 20,000. Trade union activity came to a standstill and their peasant organizations were almost wiped out.

The tragedy of the CPI was that it had to yield first place to the Congress in securing the loyalties of the Indian people, during the crucial phase of Indian independence. It had to fight for the confidence of the Indian people, against a party whose ideology was generated from the Indian ethos, while it was regarded as alien. Thus the contending needs of legitimacy and linkage with the international communist movement generated tensions which became all the more intolerable and later led to two splits and formation of breakaway parties, the CPM and the CPI (ML).

1951 saw the communists making an attempt to come back into the national mainstream. In the 1952 elections, the Communist Party made quite a creditable debut with 28 seats in the Legislative Assembly. It won 46 and 50 seats in the 1957 and 1962 elections. By 1962, the party was encouraged by its performance at the polls came to adopt constitutionalism.

On October 20, 1962, China launched a massive onslaught on India and with that was accomplished the nationalization of the CPI and its split. The CPI attacked the Chinese aggression and assured Nehru of the CPI's complete support.

in the war. The majority of the West Bengal Unit voted against the National Council Resolution, but two powerful district committees (Calcutta and Midnapur) endorsed it. The state Council was disbanded; over one hundred communists of West Bengal were imprisoned and the state councils powers were delegated to a Provincial Organizing Committee.

In early 1964, the dissident leaders were released from jail and tried to reestablish the State Council. The Rightists walked out but the centrists like Jyoti Basu tried to arrive at a compromise. But the others, e.g. Harekrishna Konar did not agree to the compromise and so the split became a reality. From 1964, started the competition between the two parties that continued unabated except for a short period at the end of the 1960s. Immediately after the split, both the parties became very active in their efforts to increase their membership.

The areas in which the CPM and CPI are active, are very differentiated.

The CPM is very active in the Bengali urban conurbation comprising Burdwan, Nadia, Hooghly and Howrah districts plus the Calcutta metropolitan area. The CPM has been fairly active in the five border districts of Northern Bengal. In recent years the CPM has ventured into Purulia, Birbhum and Murshidabad. The CPI...along the north-eastern perimeter of West Bengal, especially Midnapur and the portion 24 Parganas bordering on Bangladesh. (23)

23 WEINER (Myron) and OSGOODFIELD (John), The Communist Parties of West Bengal, Delhi, Manohar Book Service, 1974, p. 13.

The operational base of both the communist parties is predominantly middle class. But the CPM is making determined efforts to influence the rural poor. The CPM Central Committee laid the greatest emphasis on changing this middle class orientation of its party organization.

A fairly large proportion of our members are recruited from the peasantry and the different strata of urban and the rural middle class, instead of the urban and rural proletariat.... While not minimizing the need of our party's intensive work among the students, youth and urban middle class, our party will have to mainly base its recruitment on the urban proletariat and rural poor. (24)

The social base of the leadership of the communist parties is high-caste middle class. According to Bhabani Sengupta,

The majority of the 33 members of the State Committee of the West Bengal State Conference of CPM in December 1968 were high caste, middle class intellectuals. Six were Brahmins, 12 Kayastha and 8 Baidya, while one belonged to a low caste. Two were Muslims and one non-Bengali. (25)

The Congress Party's political strategy was to maintain links with groups in the food production and distribution networks. The communist parties, especially the CPM depend on their strategy to promote class conflict and for this purpose they have created class organizations to serve as a base for gaining electoral victories. This took the form of what Franda called 'revolutionary strategy' and influence through protest and the political activities of ancillary groups,

24 CPM Pamphlet, Our Tasks on Party Organization, Calcutta, 1968.

25 SENGUPTA (Bhabani), op. cit., p. 156.

student organizations, peasant organizations and trade unions.

The communists have initiated procession, hartals, strikes, boycotts, riots and violence in order to inculcate the revolutionary mood among the people. In the 1960s the political and economic scenerio was favourable to the communist parties. Escalation of defense expenditure, rising prices, food riots, inflation, disappearance of Nehru and B.C. Roy from the political scene, created a very critical situation. The Bengal Unit of the CPI became increasingly more radical and from the early 1960s began to organize mass protests, mostly in the Calcutta area. After the CPI split, the CPI gave the lead in a series of mass actions over food shortages and distribution, high prices, a move to raise tuition fees in colleges and similarly 'loaded' economic issues of immediate concern to the public. On the eve of the 1967 elections, a series of bundhs and strikes swept over the state. The communist parties have made frequent use of the legislature - the question hour, adjournment motions, and budget debates to embarrass the government and undermine its legitimacy.

The communist organizations have tried to promote class conflict and class consciousness among their target groups. The All-India Kisan Sabha, the CPI's peasant front organization was involved in guerrilla activity soon after independence. It was banned until 1951. After 1951, it had continued to organize tenants against landlords but it was only after 1961, that the Kisan Sabha could penetrate to the lower strata of

the peasantry, i.e. the poor peasants, sharecroppers, and agricultural labourers. The formation of the second united front government in 1969 saw the high tide of the peasant movement sweep the entire countryside with unprecedented speed.

As far as the communist trade union, the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) is concerned, the struggle between the right and left communists within it has been as intense as between the employers and employed, whom they claim to represent.

When the Communist Party of India split in 1964, their trade union and other wings remained united. The uneasy truce between the two communist wings were, however, ^{brought} to the fore when the united front government came into power in West Bengal in 1967. By 1969 the fissure became a split. The militant wing under the guidance of the CPM split from the parent body to form the CITU in 1970. (26)

The reason for the parting of ways between the two communist parties in the AITUC was that the rightists, especially after 1967, demanded 'a ban on strikes, bypassed the question of need-based minimum wage, put the responsibility of industrial strife on the employers and workers, praised the labour code which the leftists regarded as one-sided'.²⁷ Ranen Sen, the President of the Bangla Trade Union Congress and the Secretary of the West Bengal State Council of the CPI demanded a ban on strikes, especially 'in the case of public utility concerns'.²⁸

The CPM took a more radical line and the tenures of

26 INDIA TODAY, April 1-15, 1978, p. 52.

27 CPM Pamphlet, Dange and Co. Disrupt AITUC, Calcutta; National Book Agency, 1970.

28 Ibid., p. 27.

the first United Front Government of 1967 and 1969 were marked by strikes, gheraos, lockouts, closure of sick mills in Bengal. The police forces were ordered not to interfere in what was termed as 'industrial disputes'.

The Student Federation of India, the Student Front Group of the Communist Party has been active in mass movements and struggles initiated by the party. Immediately after independence, when the Ranadive-Rajeshwar Rao 'insurrection' thesis was the recognized political line, the Student Federation plunged into revolutionary activity in Bengal.

After 1951, it became less militant but was more radical than the other student groups. It agitated against fee increments in schools and colleges and was active in the Bengali-Bihar agitation, in the movement against increasing tram fares in 1953 and 1954. In 1964 it was prominent in the agitation against Hindu-Muslim riots. (29)

A split in the Communist Party led to a split in the Student Federation, with the All-India Student Federation staying with the CPI and the Student Federation of India linking itself with the CPM. After the two wars of 1962 and 1965, an economic crisis in West Bengal and essential commodities for e.g. kerosene, paper became scarce. Agitations launched by the communist student organizations was a source of embarrassment for the Congress Government of P.C. Sen.

Weiner and Osgoodfield have drawn our attention to the limited nature of the communist electoral efforts. At no time prior to 1971 had communist candidates contested even

three-fifths of the seats available to them. The communist have participated in government three times, in 1967, 1969, 1977, credit goes to them for building up a communist movement from such a restricted electoral base.

In the elections of 1952, 1957, 1962, the Communist Party of India offered candidates in 36 per cent, 4 per cent, and 58 per cent of the candidates respectively. Its tally of seats improved, along with expansion of its electoral efforts - 28 seats in 1952, 46 seats in 1957, 50 seats in 1962 elections. The communist parties depend on the members of their trade unions and peasant organizations for votes; campaign literature and speeches are filled with slogans which promise benefits for the non-influential masses.

4. Marxist Left Parties

The forerunners of the Marxist left parties, according to Marcus Franda, were a large number of social groups of writers, students and teachers, who were deeply affected by the writings of Bengali reformers. The living conditions of these middle class intellectuals worsened with the partition of Bengal in 1906 and other economic and cultural dislocations that followed.

Unable to find their rightful place in society, these frustrated elements turned not only against the alien rulers but also against the well-to-do upper class social elites who monopolized their country's leadership...feeling themselves betrayed by the moderate policy of the 'bourgeois leadership', they were drawn to the cult of revolutionary violence. (30)

Two of the revolutionary organizations, the Jugantar and Anushilan Samiti laid the groundwork for the later Marxist left parties. Some of the earliest communist leaders for e.g., Virendranath Chattopadhyay, Abani Mukherjee, M.N. Roy, were terrorists, who as fugitives from British justice had come into contact with communist teachings abroad.

A number of small, closed social groups that had sprung up in Bengal turned to Marxist doctrines and Marxist forms of group organization during the 1920s and 1930s. After the suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement, some of these groups broke away from the Congress and emerged as independent political organizations. Similarly, a few groups had also emerged from the communist movement. In fact, during this period, India witnessed the emergence of different shades of leftist parties, all of which were characterized by their opposition to the Gandhian leadership of the Congress and their adherence to Marxian ideals.

Forward Bloc was the largest of the Marxist left parties and was founded in 1939 by Subhas Bose in order to unite leftist groups within the Congress. In the very beginning Bose intended to keep out of the proposed left Bloc but when he realized that his differences with Gandhi were irreconcilable, he decided to take it upon himself to organize the Forward Bloc against the Congress Party.

Bose's attitude towards the Congress Party and other leftist parties was ambiguous. He declared:

The Forward Bloc will function as an integral part of the Congress. It will accept the present constitution of the Congress - its creed, policy and programmes...it will also be a platform of all anti-imperialist, radical and progressive groups. (31)

Formed, as it was, to serve as a rallying point for Bose's thwarted political ambitions, it was hardly an auspicious start for the Forward Bloc.

In the meantime, World War II had begun and the Forward Bloc gave a call for struggle against British imperialism with the result that it was banned. Subhas Bose was arrested in 1940 and by 1941 he was abroad, organizing the Indian National Army in South-East Asia.

Some factors emerge clearly from this brief study. Firstly, its birth was precipitated by personal factors, i.e. the power struggle within the Congress between Gandhi and Bose. Secondly, its programme was vague. Bose never spelled out what he meant by Marxism. Thirdly, it was denied strong leadership due to the absence of its founder and the lack of competent leadership after Bose's disappearance from the national scene.

In 1946, the working committee of the All India Forward Bloc declared itself to a Socialist Party with an ideology. From 1946 to 1948, a bitter feud raged between Marxists and anti-Marxists in the Forward Bloc. In December 1948, the anti-

31 BOSE (Subhas Chandra), Selected Speeches, Publication Division, Government of India, Delhi, 1962, pp. 114-16.

32 WEINER (Myron), Party Politics in India, Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 117-38.

Marxists in the Forward Bloc, met at Calcutta, under the chairmanship of Ruikar and expelled the Marxists. The Marxists held their own conference at Chandernagar and declared themselves a separate party.

The two Forward Blocs adhered to the same political programme. Both favoured socialism and both condemned India's membership in the Commonwealth. The sole difference being that the Forward Bloc (Marxist) was more radical and called for a revolutionary seizure of power.

The anti-Marxist Forward Bloc (Ruikar) merged with the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) after the 1952 elections. The Forward Bloc (Marxist) split from the parent Forward Bloc in 1954.

The electoral performance of the Forward Bloc has been average. In the 1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1969, 1971, 1972 and 1977 elections, the number of seats it gained were 11, 8, 13, 13, 21, 3, 0 and 25 respectively. The Forward Bloc (Ruikar) won 2 seats in the 1952 elections, after which it ceased to have a separate identity of its own. The Forward Bloc (Marxist) won 2 seats in 1957, nil in 1962, 1 in 1967 and 1 in 1969, 2 in 1971 and 3 in 1977 elections.

Revolutionary Socialist Party had its roots in the Anushilan terrorist organization which changed its name in 1930 to the Hindustan Republican Army and finally in 1938 to the Revolutionary Socialist Party.

After the Chittagong armoury raid in 1930, the revolutionaries while in jail, became influenced by Marxian ideas.

They prepared a thesis while in jail which was adopted by the Central Committee of their newly founded party in 1938. Their theses recognized the proletariat allied with the peasantry and the lower middle class as the only consistently revolutionary class and declared that the goal of the new party was the violent overthrow of the British imperialists and the establishment of communism and a classless society. The final victory of the proletariat over imperialism and its allies, it said, would "assume the form of a dictatorship" because it was inevitably bound to rely on military forces, on the arming of the masses and not on institutions established by 'lawful' and 'peaceful' means. Although the thesis recognized the Soviet Union as the "base of the coming socialist world Revolution", it pointed out the ideal of internationalism presupposed the development of the revolutionary movement in one's own country.

The new party soon became involved in tensions with the Congress Party in the matter of supporting the candidature of Subhas Bose for Presidentship of Congress. The essential issue in this struggle between Bose and the Congress pro-Gandhian leadership was the policy which the Congress sought to pursue in the event of war, whether preparation for a mass struggle against the British should begin in anticipation of war or whether a mass struggle should be postponed because of the threat of power.

33 The Thesis of the RSP - "What Revolutionary Socialism Stands For", Calcutta, 1946.

In 1940, the RSP described the Second World War as the 'second imperialist war', even after the German attack upon Soviet Russia, they continued to oppose the war as 'imperialist'. The transfer of power after the war was contemptuously regarded by the RSP as a deal between Congress and imperialism.

The RSP split before the 1952 elections factionalism prevented it from an impact on the electorate. The two factions that emerged from the parent party were the Socialist Unity Centre (SUC) and Workers Party of India. The RSP's record of seats in the elections has been 3, 9, 6, 12, 3, 3, 1 in 1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1969, 1971, 1972 and 1977 elections.

According to Marcus Franda, the organizational base of the RSP is sub-regional in character.

Since independence more than two-thirds of the state seats won by the RSP have been won by in the RSP strongholds of Murshidabad, Jalpaiguri and West Dinajpur. (34)

The RSP has been distinguished from parties like the Gurkha League and the LSS, in that it runs candidates from almost every district in West Bengal, but concentrates on particular sub-regions.

In the period prior to 1967 it concentrated most of its resources in those districts where it now has an organizational base - assigning most of their members to work in these areas and committing themselves to flood relief and

34 FRANDA (Marcus), Political Development and Political Decay in Bengal, p. 203.

other "constructive work" projects - while protesting against the neglect of its sub-regional strongholds and holding out the promise of greater benefits. Since 1967 the RSP Health Minister in both United Front Cabinets has been the leader of the Murshidabad unit of the party, where the RSP has its main base. (35)

Revolutionary Communist Party of India was founded in 1934 by Saumyendranath Tagore, when he broke away from the CPI. After he left the CPI, he formed the Communist League, which later changed its name to the Communist Party and finally to the Revolutionary Communist Party of India. The RCPI opposed the Second World War as imperialist, supported the Quit India movement and bitterly attacked both the Russian invasion of Finland and the Stalin-Hitler pact.

The RCPI, similar to the RSP and CPI is organized along Marxist-Leninist lines, with branches from party cells to a central committee at the top. The RCPI has most of its influence among students in Calcutta. Though revolutionary in name, it embarked on the electoral path like the Communist Party (undivided) and other Marxist Left parties. The RCPI opened its account with 2 seats in the 1969 Assembly elections - in the 1971 Assembly elections, it maintained its record but it was unsuccessful in the 1972 and 1977 elections.

The Bolshevik Party originated from the Bengali Labour Party, created in 1933 by N.D. Majumdar, a young Bengali student who had been deeply impressed by Marxist ideas, while studying in

the London School of Economics.

In 1936, the Labour Party and the Communist Party, for all purposes, combined, i.e., the members of the Labour Party, while retaining their organization, became members of the Communist Party. With the advent of the Second World War, the Labour Party established a group called the 'Bolshevik Party', which was to function as its underground wing during the war. The Labour Party, like the RSP, RCPI, declared the war as imperialist, with the subsequent arrest and later joining of N.D. Majumder in the Congress, the Labour Party died a natural death.

The 'underground' wing, i.e. the Bolshevik Party survived the demise of the Labour Party and lined up with the Communist Party in support for the people's war.

The Bolshevik Party claimed that it is "the party of the Indian Working Class", based on the formulation and implementation of the principles of Marxism-Leninism. The party condemns the Anglo-American imperialists and expresses its support for the glorious successes achieved by the Soviet Union in the field of postwar reconstruction and the consolidation of the people's democracy in China. It supports abolition of landlordism without compensation, sweeping agrarian reforms, repeal of the Preventive Detention Act, 36
confiscation of foreign capital, nationalization of industry.

The Marxist left parties, are organizationally separate

but share similarities in their mode of functioning and ideological affiliations.

Firstly, all these parties started with revolutionary protestations but they gradually changed their tactics and resorted to parliamentarism.

Secondly, these parties are usually small and come alive during elections - they generally suffer from lack of funds and lack of organizational expertise.

Thirdly, these parties have been dominated by personalities - Forward Bloc by Subhas Bose, RCPI by Saumyendranath Tagore, Bolshevik Party by N.D. Majumder.

Fourthly, they lack an all-India character, they function as regional parties with their base being Bengal.

Fifthly, all have a long history and tradition of its own. Forward Bloc, Bolshevik Party, Labour Party, Revolutionary Socialist Party were all founded in the thirties.

5. Minor Parties

Praja Socialist Party had its origin in West Bengal when in 1948, Prafulla Ghosh resigned from the Congress Party, shortly after he had resigned as Chief Minister of West Bengal. Ghosh formed the Peasants People's Worker Party which eventually combined with the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) and the socialists to form the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) at the national level. In the 1952 Assembly elections, it won 15 seats, in the 1957 elections it won 21 seats, but after that, its electoral performance continued to be poor. It won 5 seats

in 1962, 7 seats in 1967, 5 seats in 1969, 3 seats in 1971. In 1972 it merged with the SSP, to form the Socialist Party but it did not have any success in the 1972 and 1977 Assembly polls.

Franda is of the opinion:

The Socialists' weakness has resulted from their growing emphasis on Gandhism, a reactionary outlook in the minds of most middle class Bengalis. The removal by death of two of their senior leaders in 1962 and the departure of 3 other PSP leaders could also be the reason for its performance in 1962. (37)

Jana Sangh and Hindu Mahasabha

Jana Sangh and Hindu Mahasabha won 9 and 4 seats respectively in the 1952 elections but they failed to win even one seat in the 1957 Assembly polls. The Jana Sangh won one seat in 1967 and one seat in 1971 Assembly elections. The Jana Sangh's vote declined from 6.1 per cent in 1952 to 0.2 per cent in 1972 and Hindu Mahasabha's vote declined from 2.37 per cent in 1952 to 0.13 per cent in 1969.

The reason for the decline of the popularity of the communal parties was that Bengalis, after the exposure to liberal traditions early in British India, refused to adhere to casteist ideas and religious orthodoxy. Bengali social reformers and thinkers like Bankim Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda advocated a European society, with India's religion, and explained Puranic religion and culture with the aid of European

logic, philosophy and history. The Hindu Mahasabha and Jana Sangh thus, were unacceptable to most Bengalis. The Jana Sangh was founded by a Bengali and had some adherents when he was alive, but after his death in 1954 and its advocacy of Hindi, as national language, it alienated the Bengalis.

Lok Sevak Sangh and Gurkha League are two sub-regional parties in West Bengal. The Lok Sangh is a Gandhian socialist party confined to Purulia district, it is pledged to further the interests of Purulia. In the words of Marcus Franda,

The LSS is led by a small group of Gandhians who worked together in Purulia before independence, but who left the Congress in 1949, when they became convinced that the Congress was violating the principles that Gandhi had established for the party after his death. Since Purulia was transferred to West Bengal in 1956, the LSS has played upon the widespread discontent that accompanied the transfer. (38)

The Lok Sevak Sangh's electoral performance has been 7 seats in 1957, 4 seats in 1962, 5 seats in 1967, 4 seats in 1969 and none in 1971, 1972, 1977 Assembly polls. The Gurkha League represents the interests of the hill people in Darjeeling district, who feel threatened because they form such a minor part of West Bengal and the Indian Nation.

The Gurkha League was founded in May 1943, around the demand for the political autonomy of Darjeeling district in independent India and has periodically presented memoranda to the British, Indian, West Bengal governments for an administrative status separate from that of West Bengal. At the

same time, the Gurkha League has run candidates in each of West Bengal's elections, arguing that a separate hill people's party can better protect the interests of hillmen. (39)

The Gurkha League won 3 seats in 1952, 2 seats in 1962, 2 seats in 1967 and 4 seats in 1969, 2 seats in 1971, none in 1972 elections. The Gurkha League had been able to form parliamentary alliances with both the Congress and United Front, with the results that it had representatives in both the Congress and United Front ministries.

TABLE 9

NUMBER OF SEATS GAINED BY POLITICAL PARTIES IN WEST BENGAL
ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1952-69

	1952	1957	1962	1967	1969
Congress	150	152	159	127	55
Bangla Congress		founded in 1966		34	33
PSP	15	21	5	7	5
SSP		founded in 1964		7	9
INDF		founded in 1968			1
	<u>165</u>	<u>173</u>	<u>162</u>	<u>175</u>	<u>103</u>
CPI	28	46	50	16	30
CPI(M)		founded in 1964		43	80
	<u>28</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>110</u>
Forward Bloc (FB)	11	8	13	13	21
FB (Marxist)	--	2	--	1	1
FB (Ruikar)	2	merged with the PSP after the 1962 elections			
Socialist Unity Centre	--	2	--	4	7
RSP	--	3	9	6	12
RCPI	--	-	--	--	2
	<u>13</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>45</u>

Table Contd.

Political Party	1952	1957	1962	1967	1969
Jana Sangh	9	--	--	1	--
Hindu Mahasabha	4	--	--	-	--
Swatantra Party		founded in 1959	--	1	--
	<u>13</u>	<u>--</u>	<u>--</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>--</u>
Lok Sevak Sangh (Purulia)	--	7	4	5	4
Gurkha League (Darjeeling)	3	--	2	2	4
Progressive Muslim League		founded in 1968			3
	<u>3</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>11</u>
Unsuccessful parties and Independents	16	11	11	11	11
Total	238	252	252	280	280

TABLE 10

VOTES POLLED AND SEATS WON IN WEST BENGAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
ELECTIONS (1962-1972)

	1962		1967		1969		1971		1972		
	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats	
Congress	47.3	157	41.1	127	40.4	55	29.8	105	49.1	216	
Old Congress	(split from Congress in 1969-70)						5.9	2	1.4	2	
Bangla Congress	(founded in 1966)		10.4	34	8.0	33	5.5	5 (merged with Congress)			
PSP	55.0	5	1.9	7	1.3	5	0.6	3 (merged with SSP)			
SSP	(founded in 1964)		2.1	7	1.8	9	0.5	1 (merged with PSP)			
Socialist Party	(founded in 1972, result of PSP-SSP merger in that year)									0.9	0
CPI	25.0	50	6.5	16	6.8	30	8.7	13	8.4	35	
CPM	(split in 1964)		18.1	43	19.6	80	33.8	113	27.5	14	
Forward Bloc	4.6	13	3.9	13	5.4	21	3.7	3	2.7	0	
Forward Bloc(M)	0.3	0	0.2	1	0.2	1	0.2	2	0.2	0	
SUC	0.7	0	0.7	4	1.5	7	2.1	7	1.4	1	

(Table contd.)

	1962		1967		1969		1971		1972	
	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats	% Votes	Seats
RSP	2.6	9	2.1	6	2.8	12	2.2	3	2.0	3
RCPI	0.4	0	0.3	0	0.4	2	0.4	2	0.2	0
Worker's Party	0.3	0	0.3	2	0.4	2	0.2	2	0.2	1
Jana Sangh	0.5	0	1.3	1	0.8	0	0.3	1	0.2	0
Swatantra	0.6	0	0.8	1	0.1	0	0.1	0	0.0	0
Lok Sevak Sangh	0.7	4	0.7	5	0.7	4	0.6	0	0.4	0
Gurkha League	0.4	2	0.5	2	0.5	4	0.3	2	0.5	0
Other parties and Independents	11.6	12	9.1	11	9.3	15	5.1	15	4.9	8
Total	100.0	252	100.0	280	100.0	280	100.0	280	100.0	280

Source: WEINER and OSGOODFIELD, Electoral Politics in the Indian States, Delhi, 1974, p. 8.

TABLE 11

PARTY POSITION IN 1977 ASSEMBLY POLLS

Parties	Number of contesting candidates	Number of victorious candidates	Second position	Forfeiting of deposits
CPI(M)	224	177	26	11
Forward Bloc	36	25	6	3
RSP	23	20	2	1
RCPI	3	3	--	--
Forward Bloc(M)	3	3	--	--
Biplabi Bangla Congress	3	1	1	--
Independents sup- ported by Left Front	1	1	--	--
Janata	293	29	80	118
Congress	293	20	160	67
CPI	63	2	5	50
SUC	26	4	2	17
Muslim League	27	1	--	26
CPI(ML)	3	1	--	1
Independents	567	6	11	506

Source: The 1977 Assembly Elections, CPM Pamphlet, Calcutta: National Book Agency, July 16, 1977.

Chapter II

THE TENURE OF THE FIRST UNITED FRONT GOVERNMENT (1967)

After twenty years of political power, the Congress Party in Bengal was ousted from office by an united front of the opposition parties, among whom were the CPI, CPM and a host of other minor Marxist parties, the RSP, Forward Bloc (Marxist), RCPI, etc. But signs of what was to be the political fate of the Congress, were already clear to the discerning eye. The mass discontent, food riots in the state provided a common platform for the opposition parties to combine their forces against the ruling Congress Party.

Section A. POLITICAL SITUATION IN 1967

The food riots in the state, served as a point of convergence for the opposition parties against the Congress. The legacy of the partition for Bengal was a critical food situation which did not improve. The latter was further intensified by a combination of factors, some of which were peculiar to Bengal and other which pertained to the entire country. Among the former can be cited the increase of the population of West Bengal by 32.2 per cent compared with an all-India average increase of 21.6 per cent, due to the influx of more than four million Hindu refugees from East Pakistan.¹ Another factor peculiar to West Bengal, was the transfer of a considerable portion of its arable land (11.4 per cent by 1964-1965)

1 FRANDA (Marcus), Radical Parties in West Bengal, Cambridge: Massachusetts, London, M.I.T. Press, 1971, pp. 135-6.

to cash crops, e.g. jute, in order to restore sources of industrial supply that had been cut off by the creation of an international boundary between the two Bengals. The causal factor that was common to both Bengal and the entire Indian situation was the recession that was the result of wars with China and Pakistan in 1962 and 1965.

1. Pre-Poll Situation

This period was characterized by acute economic crisis, there was a shortage in the supply of essential commodities like rice, oil, fuel, paper, etc. In the words of Ranajit Ray,

Trouble started with police firing in Basirhat. The Basirhat sub-division of 24 Parganas were suffering from an acute shortage of food and kerosene for about three months in 1965-66. On February 16, 1966, a demonstration demanding supplies of these essential commodities was organised in front of the SDO's office. The police first lathi-charged and then fired on the demonstration. Police firing on demonstrations, became a regular feature, thus discrediting the administration and fanning the wrath of the people. (2)

To Sen, goes the credit of attempting to formulate a rational food policy. It was his idea that Calcutta and the areas with higher purchasing power, should be cordoned off and brought under the statutory rationing system, the rest of the state was to be covered through modified rationing. He tried to introduce a stronger procurement policy and streamline the distribution system.

2 RAY (Ranajit), Agony of West Bengal, Calcutta, New Age Publishers, 1971, p. 10.

P.C. Sen's food policy misfired due to several reasons. Firstly, he was unable to isolate the minority of rich producers who also control processing and trade, the combination of rich producers - mahajans-traders-speculators who did not have any difficulty in disrupting his policy.

One of the problems of the state Government stemmed from the discrepancy between the prices it offered producers, 15 to 17 rupees per maund and those they could secure on the open market, which were 35 rupees per maund. Because of this discrepancy, most large land-owners either tried to harvest their crops early, or else tried to smuggle paddy through state cordons to Bihar, or even to Pakistan. District administrators were overwhelmed with the enormousness of the task placed before them, and evasion, was so great that by late January more than half of the West Bengal police force (30,000 but of 50,000), had been assigned full time to the cordoning operation. (3)

Secondly, the cordoning off of districts was an unwise step because it placed an intolerable burden on administrators and encouraged smugglers. According to Economic and Political Weekly,

The cordoning off of districts was another irrational aspect of the old policy. To enforce cordoning an expenditure of Rs. ten lakhs had to be incurred every month and yet in no time smuggling became a flourishing trade. A large army of smugglers, flourished since the quantity of foodgrains supplies under the so-called modified rationing was not even sufficient for 3 days. This meagre supply was also irregular. The Government machinery was so slow that modified rationing was not extended to all deserving areas

till widespread violence broke out in the state in February. (4)

Thirdly, the Government's avowed policy that all stocks procured in deficit districts would be used for local distribution, was not implemented. In most cases there were no arrangements to stock the procured paddy.

Fourthly, though cooperatives were appointed as agents of Government, maximum buying prices for them was lower than that fixed for the rice mills. It was hardly surprising that the cooperatives were unable to compete with the rice mills. In Bankura, cooperatives ultimately became agents of rice mills.

At the end of March, after the massive Bengal bandh, the Chief Minister lifted the cordon from the entire district of 24 - Parganas and from several cities in the urban belt. The only result, harmful politically, was the alienation of this powerful group from the Congress and the increase of the discontent of the masses.

Unfortunately for Sen, he also could not take his party along with him in implementing this policy. Moreover, 'he earned a reputation of being a ruthless oppressor of the peasants'.⁵ This was sufficient to spell disaster for a party whose base was in the countryside and the trader-speculator class.

The Chief Minister's handling of the opposition lacked

4 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. 1, no. 14, Bombay, November 19, 1966.

5 ROYCHOWDHURY (Prafulla), West Bengal - A Decade (1965-1975), Calcutta: Boipatra Publishers, 1977, p. 54.

political sagacity. He was hesitant in starting a dialogue with the opposition leaders. In the earlier stages of the mass movement, he resisted the opposition's demand for the formation of a people's committee for Food. Later, he announced the formation of a 32 member all-party advisory committee but the left parties boycotted the committee on the pretext that it had been made only an advisory body without any say in policy making. The real reason was probably the fact that they were interested in channelizing the grievances of the people against the Congress Party with an eye to the forthcoming polls, rather than participating in an advisory committee, to arrive at a solution to the problem. The Chief Minister's inability to attend a pre-arranged conference to discuss the crisis, added fuel to the fire. The left parties plunged into the agitation which spread to Calcutta. Assembly proceedings were disturbed, members of as opposite sides came to blows on January 21, 1966. A twenty-four hour Bangla Bandh was called by the left parties on March 10. 'The silent procession that came out in the city was perhaps the largest of its kind. It was silence and silence. But, it was the silence of the sea'.⁶

By this time, most of the opposition leaders were in jail, and police firings on demonstrations had become a permanent feature. The CPM, was the party which benefitted most ^{as} ~~of~~ it had been in the forefront of the demonstrations, and Congress propaganda foolishly put the blame on the CPM for the

6 Ibid., p. 50.

demonstrations.

Negotiation for a pre-electoral alliance of left and democratic parties in the opposition to defeat the Congress in the fourth general election of 1967, began on June 1966. A 13 party declaration was issued on August declaring that they would work together to defeat the Congress and form an alternative Government in the state. But, whatever small measure of unity they had achieved in the mass upheaval against the Congress was dissipated during negotiations for division of seats among the parties. Responsibility for this can be placed on the communist parties and the struggle for dominance between them. The parties found themselves lined up in two hostile camps, led respectively by the CPM and CPI. The former group included the Samyukta Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Socialist Unity Centre, Revolutionary Communist Party of India, Worker's Party and the Forward Bloc.

The CPM suggested that it should be allotted 122 seats while the CPI were to have only 35, the Bangla Congress 34 and the Forward Bloc only 20. In comparison, it was more generous with the parties adhering to its leadership. It proposed 24 seats for the SSP, 15 for RSP and 7 for the SUC. The CPI retaliated with a counterproposal which considerably reduced the CPM's share of the seats to 72, 60 for the Bangla Congress, 52 to CPI, 34 to Forward Bloc, 26 to RSP, 14 to SSP, 8 to PSP and 4 to SUC. (7)

The unity talks ultimately broke down and the left

7 GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal, 1967-70, Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1971, p. 69.

parties were arranged in two groups which were as much against each other as against the Congress - the United Left Front and the People's United Left Front. The former included the CPM, RSP, SSP, SUC, RCPI, Worker's Party and the Forward Bloc (Marxist). The latter included the CPI, Bangla Congress, Forward Bloc, Bolshevik Party, Gorkha League and Lok Sevak Sangh.

2. The Outcome of 1967 Elections

The election results of 1967 polls in West Bengal was a surprise only to a few. The Congress was deprived, for the first time in post-independence Bengal, of an absolute majority in the state Assembly. It secured 127 seats in a House of 280; the total percentage of votes polled in its favour was reduced from 47.4 per cent in 1962 to 41.4 per cent in 1967. Notwithstanding its loss of majority, the Congress Party was the largest party in the Assembly.

Though both the ULF and PULF had claimed that they would get majority on their own, both the Fronts together surpassed the Congress Party by only 7 seats. The CPM, the second largest party in the Assembly had only 93 seats to the Congress's 127. The CPI managed only a paltry 16. In the general elections of 1962, the undivided Communist Party had secured 25.4 per cent of the votes polled. But, in the 1967 elections, the combined percentage of votes declined down to 24.06 per cent. In comparison to the CPI, the Bangla Congress made an impressive debut with 34 elected representatives in the Assembly. The communists would have put in a much better performance if they had joined their ranks and likewise, the

Congress would have fared better if the breakaway Bangla Congress had not eaten into its votes.

The Congress Party's failure to obtain majority of seats in the 1967 Assembly elections may be attributed to several factors.

Feelings of alienation from those who held the reins of power (in this case, the Congress Party) were widespread among wide sections of the people. The inefficiency of the Congress Government was highlighted by the food riots that convulsed the state in the first half of 1966. The leftist parties, especially the CPM, took advantage of the upsurge of hostility against the Government. Mass agitation was encouraged on a host of issues - food shortage, price increases, release of political detainees, redress of teacher and student grievances; the culmination of agitational activities was the massive Bangla bandh on March 2.

According to Marcus Franda,

Most embarrassing for the Congress Party were the serious disagreements that developed between state and central leaders as to how to cope with the movement with Chief Minister P.C. Sen attempting to prevent either Mrs. Gandhi or Home Minister Nanda from appearing in Calcutta. The Chief Minister and several of his colleagues threatened to resign at several points because of disagreements with the central government about procedure of dealing with the riots, and in consequence the state administration was frequently leaderless and confused, which in turn forced it to rely all the more on the army and the police. (8)

The state government's image was tarnished by its handling of the situation, the people started looking about them for an alternative to the Congress.

The most significant factor behind the defeat of the Congress was the emergence of the Bangla Congress. According to Economic and Political Weekly,

The Congress votes slumped by 6.4 per cent from 47.3 per cent in 1962 to 40.9 per cent in 1967, the traditional left parties in the state had not gained in any way from this decline of percentage of Congress votes. Communist votes remained static in both the third and fourth general elections. Socialist (PSP and SSP) and Forward Bloc votes had marginally declined from 5 per cent and 4.69 per cent in 1962 to 4.3 per cent and 4.24 per cent respectively in 1967. The entire loss in Congress votes were captured by Bangla Congress. (9)

Another factor that went against the Congress Party in Bengal was the withdrawal of support of large sections of the Muslim community. According to Shankar Ghosh,

Security measures in West Bengal were more stringent because it is a border state. A large number of Muslims were detained, some of them respected members of the community. With the result that, an impression was created among large section of Muslims that they were persecuted only because of their religion. The Muslims felt that the Congress was incapable of implementing its secular policies.... The Muslim voters found in the Bangla Congress a suitable alternative. (10)

9 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. IV, no. 5, February 1969, p. 277.

10 GHOSH (Shankar), op. cit., pp. 63-64.

TABLE 12

CONGRESS PERFORMANCE IN FOUR GENERAL ELECTIONS

Year	Strength of Assembly	Seats Won by Congress	Voted Polled by Congress	Percentage of the total
1952	238	151	2,886,538	38.2
1957	252	152	4,830,998	46.1
1962	252	157	4,488,515	47.4
1967	280	127	5,207,468	41.11

Source: GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal, Calcutta, p. 71.

TABLE 13

COMMUNIST PERFORMANCE IN FOUR GENERAL
ELECTIONS

Year	Strength of Assembly	Seats Won by CPI	Votes Polled by CPI	Percentage of the total
1952	238	28	732,304	9.7
1957	252	46	1,865,106	17.8
1962	252	50	2,379,953	25.4
1967	280	CPM 43	CPM 2,247,309	CPM 17.74
		CPM 16	CPI 801,291	CPI 6.32

Source: GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal, Calcutta: Orient Longman, p. 71.

The announcement of the West Bengal Congress that it would not form the ministry, was a signal to the left parties to come together in their bid to capture power. The decision of the West Bengal Congress was perhaps prompted by the fact that leaders like P.C. Sen, Atulya Ghosh, Tarun Kanti Ghosh, Purabi Mukherjee, failed to get elected. The Congress Legislative Party was virtually left leaderless. Stunned as they were, the state party leadership probably dared not risk another round of controversy centering around the election of a new legislative party leader.

Another motivating factor might have been the fact that the inability of the two parties forging a post-electoral alliance had been taken for granted by the Congress. In the event of this factor materializing, the Congress calculated that it would get a chance to win over the loyalty of some elements in the two fronts and thus form a ministership.

The two fronts had campaigned as bitterly against each other as against the Congress. According to an account given by Barun Sengupta,

On the evening of 22nd February, Humayun Kabir of Bangla Congress, who was nursing a grievance against the Congress, took the initiative to form Bengal's first leftist Government. Initial discussions took place between Kabir and Ashu Ghosh of Forward Bloc.

On the 24th of morning, 5 party meetings took place in Humayun Kabir's room in Central Government Hotel. Participants were CPM's Jyoti Basu, Niranjan Sen, Bangla Congress's Humayun Kabir, Jahangir Kabir, CPI's Somnath Lahiri. In this meeting it was

formally decided that Ajoy Mukherjee was to be Chief Minister and ministerships were to be distributed among the five participating parties. (11)

The ease with which the various constituents of the two fronts sank their differences, when it became evident that the Congress would fail to secure an absolute majority could be due to two factors, firstly, they had never experienced such close proximity to power. They realized that the Congress was still the single largest party in the Assembly and in the absence of an United Front outnumbering the Congress Party, the Governor's invitation to form the ministry would have gone to the Congress. Secondly, the left parties felt that the political tide was turning in their favour, after a period of twenty years of Congress dominance. So, they resolved to take the opportunity that presented itself, to state their claim to political power.

Thus, after the 1967 Assembly elections, West Bengal had a Government, with significant communist participation. What made it more important than the 1959 experience in Kerala was that it is one of the most important industrial centres of the country. Its proximity to the iron and coal mines has made it an important producer of engineering goods. It also is a notable foreign exchange earner in its tea and jute goods. Its proximity to the borders of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and China gives it immense strategic importance.

11 SENGUPTA (Barun), Pala Badalar Pala, Calcutta, Anand Publishers, 1971, pp. 1-9.

Section B: CATEGORIES OF CONTRADICTIONS AND THE
FIRST UNITED FRONT COALITION

Any coalition government will have certain inbuilt contradictions which will have an impact on its functioning. In addition, the United Front coalition government had within it a contradiction of an ideological nature. This was due to the fact that parties adhering to 'right' and 'left' ideologies, i.e. Bangla Congress CPI, CPM, were participants of the two united front coalition of 1967 and 1969. The aim in this section will be to study the various contradictions to which the coalition government of 1967 was subject. The contradictions can be enumerated as follows.

Firstly, inherent contradictions existing within the United Front.

Secondly, contradictions that developed later, due to the struggle for dominance among the various partners of the United Front.

Thirdly, ideological contradictions between the participants of the united front, as there was the Bangla Congress, which represented the rich peasants. On the other hand, there were parties, for e.g., the CPI, CPM, RSP, RCPI, SUC, claimed to represent the working class interests.

Fourthly, external systemic factors played a major role in accelerating the disintegration of the coalition government in 1967. In this context, the contradiction in the attitudes of the central and state governments during this period must be studied.

1. Inherent Contradictions

In the delineation of the inherent contradictions existing within the coalition government in 1967, three factors must be kept in mind. Firstly, notwithstanding the 13 party declaration issued in August 1966 stating their determination to defeat the Congress and form an alternative government, the negotiations for a pre-poll adjustment fell through. It was only after the Congress decision to refrain from attempting to form a government even though it was the single largest party in the state Assembly, did the opposition parties try to push through some kind of post-poll political adjustment to achieve political power. Proximity to political power was the signal for the formation of the United Front in 1967. Eager to grasp power the left parties thrust aside ideological considerations and forced a ramshackle alliance overnight. The alliance was named United Front to accommodate the sentiments of the ULF, PULF and also those who may not like to be dubbed left.

The CPM swallowed all that it had been said against the Bangla Congress in the preceding one year and accepted Ajoy Mukherji's leadership. Secondly, the fact that only a minimum programme was only possible points to the existence of inherent contradictions. A eighteen-point minimum programme was announced at a public meeting held on the Calcutta maidan on March 1. It was a product of considerable give and take, for most of the parties constituting the front are known advocates of more drastic measures. Severe ideological

differences between the parties constituting the Front, made it necessary for the programme to be couched in general terms. The 18 point programme was by no means radical at least by communist standards. 'In point of fact, this programme resembles the programme which the Congress has time and again placed before the country but which it has not pursued with vigour'.¹²

Notwithstanding the fact that the United Front Government in 1967 was the first government with communist participation in West Bengal, it did not promise any radical measures in relation to labour; it only stated its intention to substantially improve the working conditions of labour in Bengal. Even the need to ensure and enforce a minimum wage for all categories of workers, was not recognized. The UP Government's responsibility to improve the lot "of all sections of distressed tillers", was vague, and only a passing mention was made of "progressive land reforms". Thirdly, the inherent contradiction was between the programme of the United Front which was announced with much fanfare on March 1 and the goals that were sought to be pursued by the CPM, the party among the United Front coalition partners, which had the greatest strength in the Assembly. The Preamble of the 18 Point Programme was confident of its ability to shoulder responsibility on the strength of the confidence reposed on it by the people to ameliorate the distressing conditions of the people.

12 RAY (Ranajit), op. cit., p. 106.

This was in direct conflict with the CPM's theoretical understanding that it was a 'revolutionary party'.

The fundamental antagonism between communist and bourgeoisie groups was to be the guiding principle in the struggle for ascendance among the partners of the United Front. A CPM pamphlet categorically asserted that:

It is a fundamental error to think that an United Front freezes the situation as between parties and classes, that it is an exception to the laws of motion and change and it is a permanent happy family. (13)

Thus, the Marxian Communist Party's primary aim was to give priority to mass issues, class demands and to be in the forefront of mass actions.

In a word, the UF Government that we have now are to be treated and understood as instruments of struggle in the hands of our people, more than as Governments that actually possess adequate power, that can materially and substantially give relief to the people. (14)

2. Contradictions Due to Struggle for Dominance Among UF Partners

Apart from inherent contradictions discussed earlier, certain contradictions developed later due to the struggle for dominance among the various partners of the U.F. The struggle for dominance occurred on two planes, firstly, struggle for dominance within the United Front ministry vis-a-vis

13 CPM Pamphlet, Right Communist Betrayal of Kerala U.F. and Government, Calcutta, National Book Agency, December 1969, p. 100.

14 CPM Pamphlet, New Situation and Party Tasks, Calcutta, National Book Agency, April 1967.

other members of the United Front. Secondly, struggle for dominance outside the United Front, i.e., the struggle for increasing the operational base of the parties.

The struggle to gain a dominating position within the United Front was inevitable because no party had an overwhelmingly strong position vis-a-vis other partners in the coalition, nor was any party recognized as such by the others. The difference in the number of seats won in the Assembly Election in 1967 was not very large, especially among the CPM and Bangla Congress.

On the day after the 18 point programme was announced, 5 senior Ministers of the United Front Ministry were sworn in. Ajoy Mukherji took over Home and General administration, Jyoti Basu was given Finance and Transport, Harekrishna Konar of CPM was given Land and Land Revenue and Refugee Rehabilitation. Education was taken over by the Worker's Party, a satellite of the CPM, and the Labour Portfolio went to the Socialist Unity Centre. The portfolio of Food went to Dr. P.C. Ghosh. With 34 members in the Assembly, the Bangla Congress got 4 ministerial posts while the CPM with 43 MLAs got only 3. The CPI and Forward Bloc had two each.

The flexibility shown by the CPM during the formulation of the common programme and allocation of portfolios indicate that it did not attach much importance to ministry making. But, it is significant that the portfolios allocated to the CPM and its satellite left parties were Land and Land Revenue, Refugee Rehabilitation, Labour, Education, which facilitated

contact with the masses.

The CPM pursued a dual policy towards other partners in the United Front coalition, firstly, flexibility and ability to compromise during formulation of programme and distribution of portfolios among the parties. Secondly, maintaining relentless pressure on the other parties, exposing their mistakes and the malfunctioning of their departments with utter disregard to the principle of collective responsibility. The CPM launched a vicious propaganda offensive against Dr. P.C. Ghosh, the Minister for Food, for inability to enforce the procurement policy of the United Front Government.

As for as struggle for dominance outside the United Front is concerned, the CPM's policy is clear. It did not hesitate to admit that it was participating in the U.F. not to make it work but wreck it from within and without.

The CPM indulged in a great deal of polemics about the necessity of preparing the masses for revolution, quoting Lenin in this context -

It goes without saying that to further agitation and struggle in this connection, temporary agreements with various groups of revolutionary bourgeoisie democrats are specially expedient...but on the other hand we should be failing in our duty as the party of the advanced class if in an agitation we failed to produce an advanced revolutionary slogan at the present stage of the democratic revolution. (15)

15 LENIN (V.I.), "Boycott of Bulygin Duma and Insurrection" in Collected Works, Moscow, 1962.

In reality it was a well planned and coordinated strategy to extend its operational base in the state by radicalizing its image among the urban and rural proletariat. The means, it utilized, in this context were two, gherao and occupation of benami land by poor peasants and landless labourers.

Gherao, in very General terms, is the placing of restrictions on the freedom of managerial personnel by the workers till the grievances of latter are reduced. The CPM and its satellite parties in the United Front Government encouraged gheraos by preventing the use of police against striking labour. The CPM and its satellite left parties were busy setting up labour unions where there were none. To dislodge the old unions, they pursued militant policies and used their influence with the United Front ministry in getting their demands met. ¹⁶ An idea of the recent increase in the strength of the CPM on the Labour Front is available in an increase in the membership of the All India Trade Union Congress.

In the last few months, unions with a total membership of nearly 75,000 have applied for affiliation with those organizations, i.e. AITUC, and CPM trade union workers think at least 50,000 would be admitted to the fold. This would mean 25 per cent increase in the strength of the AITUC in four months.... The CPM is now the dominant party among the state's 250,000 engineering workers, it has also made considerable advance among the state's 250,000 jute workers and 150,000 colliery workers who have only recently come under its influence. (17)

16 TIMES OF INDIA, Delhi, June 16, 1967.

17 TIMES OF INDIA, July 13, 1967.

The CPM also unleashed mass movements in the countryside by its slogan directed at poor peasants and landless labourers - 'get the list of benami land from the government and occupy it yourselves'. This was a startling innovation because during Congress rule 'benami' land vested in the government had been allowed to lapse to the landlords. The Naxalite uprising in mid 1967, in the rural areas of Naxalbari, Kharibari, Siliguri, galvanised the CPM into action -- after 1967, the poor peasantry in Bengal became an important target group for the CPM. The CPI had a very negligible rural base in the rural areas except in Kerala and Andhra, its peasant cadre was almost non-existent.¹⁸ Thus, the main rivals of the CPM in the rural areas were the Bangla Congress in the rice growing areas, CPI and Naxalites. Against the Naxalites, the CPM mounted a three pronged offensive. Firstly, cadres of all parties combined their strength against Naxalites. Secondly, CPM cadres against the Naxalites and thirdly, CPM's collaboration with organs of state coercion, i.e. the army, Central Reserve Police, against the Naxalites.

3. Ideological Contradictions

In addition to the above mentioned contradictions, ideological contradictions between some of the participants of the United Front, contributed to its eventual disintegration. It was for the first time in Bengal that a party like

18 DESAI (Meghnad), "India: Contradictions of Slow Capitalist Development in Robin Blackburn Rd.", Explosion in A Subcontinent, London; Cox and Wyman, 1975, p. 38.

the Bangla Congress which represented the rich farmer's lobby and left parties like the CPI, CPM, came together to participate in a coalition government. Due to the divergence in ideological affiliations thus represented, a great deal of tension was generated during policy formulation and implementation. It was in tackling the concrete problems facing the state - food shortage, land and industrial unrest, that the 'unity' in the newly constituted government began, to wear thin. Conflicting ideological affiliations soured the relations between the constituents of the United Front so that even the pretence of collective responsibility could not be maintained.

The food problem was a legacy of the famine conditions in 1965-66 and the unwillingness of the Congress Government to promote an intensive procurement drive for political reasons.

The United Front Government had only 50,000 tonnes in hand while the need was 600,000 tonnes of grain. The United Front Government had only two alternatives - either to press the procurement drive with the utmost vigour, or to persuade the Central Government to give West Bengal a generous portion of the surplus from those few states which grew more than they consumed. (19)

The second alternative was untenable because the visit of the Chief Minister to Delhi was unproductive. The Centre pleaded its inability to supply Bengal with the foodgrains the latter required because of the former's obligation to help the drought hit areas of Bihar. Now, the only alternative course left to the United Front Government was to pressurize

19 SENGUPTA (Bhabani), Communism in Indian Politics, Delhi, Young Asia Publication, 1978, p. 213.

the 200,000 families owning ten acres or more to sell to the official agency at least a third of what was needed to fulfil the minimum demands of the rationed areas. Failure of the food policy was due to several reasons.

Firstly, it took a month for the United Front to arrive at a decision on the food policy. When it did come, it was a curious mixture of the policy of control and decontrol - control in greater Calcutta and some other industrial areas but outside free market operations were permitted. But, the manner in which the procurement drive of 200,000 tonnes was to be realized was not specified. Soon after the food policy was announced, the ministers left the capital to supervise the procurement drive, which according to Ghosh would be the popularity test for the United Front. Having failed in their endeavour, the government announced that it would take over the produce of the rice mills. But there was no rice to be had as most of the grain had disappeared.

The next policy announcement was that more than 25 tonnes of foodgrains would not be sent from one region of the state to another, without prior permission from the B.D.O's Office. The United Front decided to launch the programme on a statewide basis. ² Food committees of officials, members of the legislature, and party representatives were set up in each district but the differences within the Cabinet paralyzed their work.^{,20}

The failure of the United Front on the food front gave rise to mass discontent and the first rumours of disunity within the Cabinet. P. Sundarayya of the CPM told reporters in Darjeeling, 'Ghosh should resign, as he has failed in his capacity as Minister for Food'. This brought forth angry retorts from Ajoy Mukherjee and Ghosh who were opposed to control on the movement of food grains as well as any kind of coercion of the well-to-do growers. The procurement drive was, therefore, a failure, and in June 1967, the weekly rice ration had to be content.²¹

Secondly, apart from vacillations within the United Front, the food policy was sabotaged by the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the district administration. "The administration is not used to methods of persuasion", wrote the statesman, "a section of it may be involved in the interaction of rural power groups and could not act as an effective initiator of a popular movement of persuasion for the success of the food policy".²² Another article appearing in the above mentioned newspaper commented:

A cabinet decision to compel the Chief growers to sell the paddy to the official agency had not been adequately emphasized by some officials who had communicated this order to the district authorities. (23)

Thirdly, another factor that was instrumental in eroding the policy of the United Front was the resistance

21 Ibid., p. 214.

22 THE STATESMAN (New Delhi), April 27, 1967.

23 THE STATESMAN, July 27, 1967.

offered by the rice miller-jotedar-Congress Party combine. The Congress Party, during its twenty years in power, had based its electoral organization in West Bengal on a number of groups that were specially significant in the state's food production and distribution network; large and small landowners, millowners, the transport industry, and a host of shopkeepers and merchants.²⁴ Congress was not in power, but it had a widespread functional network in the rural areas. The United Front parties, with their fragmented support bases could not penetrate through this obstacle. Besides, a leading constituent of the United Front, the Bangla Congress, which had impressive gains in the rice-growing districts, was not in favour of alienating the big producers. Thus, the food policy, modest though it was, failed to have any impact.

Unable to cope with mass discontent and rising dissatisfactions with the performance of the United Front, it placed the blame on the Centre. In holding the Congress Government at the Centre responsible for the difficulties of the state, the U.F. Government tried to prevent popular opinion from turning the Congress Party as an alternative to the United Front.²⁵ The United Front Government adopted a dual policy to pressurize the Central Government to release foodgrains for West Bengal. The first strategy was that of simple persuasion. In August, Mukherji, Ghosh and Basu

24 FRANDA (Marcus), op. cit., p. 38.

25 TIMES OF INDIA, June 17, 1967.

journeyed to New Delhi to ask the Centre to increase Bengal's monthly quota of foodgrains. When the above mentioned strategy failed in its objective, the U.F. Government resorted to pressure tactics. It was decided that eight ministers would stage a dharna (sit-in) outside the Prime Minister's house if the state government's demand for 10,000 tonnes of extra wheat per month was not met. The Centre relented and Bengal was promised 15,000 tonnes of foodgrains.

The food crisis accelerated the process of worsening of relations between the Centre and state and between the Constituents of the Government in West Bengal. In June, 5 Bangla Congress members defected to the Congress Party. A month later, the United Front failed to get one of its two nominees elected to the upper house of the state legislature, his Congress rival won, evidently with the support of several United Front voters'.²⁶

The land programme of the United Front did not promise any reforms of a radical nature. The change in the nature of the programme to that of 'controlled militancy' was mainly the contribution of the CPM in general and Harekrishna Konar, CPM Minister for Land and Land Revenue, in particular.

Konar was mainly concerned in the spring of 1967, with efforts to control the peasant militancy in areas which had participated in the food riots. One such sensitive area was Naxalbari, where the peasants had started a mass movement,

under the leadership of militants in the CPM.

The agitation at Naxalbari covered an area of about 25 square miles under the police station of Naxalbari, Phansidoea, Kharibari and Siliguri in the Darjeeling district. Santhals armed with bows and arrows, were guarding these villages day and night, giving protection to their leaders, many of whom were wanted by the police in cases of occupation of land, looting of foodgrains, assault and even murder. The dispute in Naxalbari was mainly over lands belonging to the Government or vested in the Government as a result of the abolition of the zamindari system. The agitators complained they were being evicted from lands they have been cultivating by persons who have no rights over these lands. (27)

The prompt support of the Naxalbari uprising by the Communist Party of China created problems for the CPM which it had to solve before a coherent land policy could be evolved.

During the spring and summer of 1967, Konar was busy tackling the herculean task of making an estimate of the land that had been misappropriated by the landlords, over and above of the 25 acre ceiling imposed by land reforms of 1950. Not much headway was made with estimating the benami land under review. The first United Front Government in 1967 had little time to bring about comprehensive legislation. Instead of drafting bills and waiting for the approval of the Central Government, it was decided that mass movements would be launched on the basis of existing laws.

Until the beginning of 1959, the Congress Government had obtained 125,000 acres of khas land but they had remained

with the landlords. By the end of July, Konar appeared to have drawn up the broad framework of a land policy that included controlled peasant militant action. This mainly included distribution of khas land among the landless. But, the long term

perspective was abolition of large-scale landholdings and distribution of land to the landless. The next step would be for the Government to explain to the peasants the disadvantage of small holdings. The peasant will then voluntarily take to collective farming. Private ownership of land will thus be done away with. (28)

Apart from the utopian element in the voluntary transformation to collective farming, it seems clear that the CPM by mid 1967 had become conscious of the agrarian unrest in the countryside.

The first clear indication that the party was evolving an agrarian policy came in August when the Bengal state committee of the party met for four days apparently to prepare for the session of the Central Committee.

The committee decided to support the struggle of the Kisans for distribution of land to the landless for stopping the eviction of sharecroppers. This tactical line was approved at the Madurai session of the CPM central committee, which gave a radical direction to the party's activity in Bengal. (29)

'Get the list of such land from the Government and occupy it yourselves', was the slogan to the peasants. The

28 KONAR (Harekrishna), "Our Land Problems", Mainstream, Delhi, July 29, 1967, p. 75.

29 SENGUPTA (Bhadani), op. cit., pp. 220-21.

CPM cadres did not actively participate in the land grab movement that followed but merely connived with it. The CPM, used its participation in the government to prevent the use of the police against the poor peasants. About 2.5 lakh acres of land were distributed to about an equal number of peasants.

The distribution of land to the land hungry peasants, without making institutional arrangements about inputs was by itself, a self-defeating measure. Besides, fragmented landholdings would have made technological innovations in agriculture uneconomic. It was mainly a strategy of the CPM to extend its rural base, and to counteract the efforts of the Naxalites build a mass base among the poor peasants in the Bengal countryside.

Efforts were being made to detect and cancel malafide transfer and to recover benami land, but not much headway could be made in this regard as the U.F. was eased out of office by the landed interests acting in conjunction with the Central Government.

The Governor was then asked to recover the benami lands, but the slogan for recovering such lands with the organised efforts of the peasants was not raised then. Had it been raised, it would probably have advanced beyond the existing level of mass consciousness. (30)

It was at this stage, that the Bangla Congress, whose social base was among the rich peasants in Bengal, realized that it was the opportune moment to check the CPM's endeavours

30 KONAR (Harekrishna), Agrarian Problems in India, Calcutta, 1977, p. 81.

to unleash the forces of peasant unrest in the rural areas.

Protest activity of labour or gherao was an important factor that marked the United Fronts short-term in office.

Meghnad Desai defines Gherao as "the ³¹ barricading by the worker's of the management in their factory, offices, until the worker's demands are met".

The causal factors that can explain the increase in the number of gheraos during the tenure of the First United Front Government can be enumerated as follows:

Firstly, the bad harvests of 1965-66, and 1966-67 had resulted in a recession in 1966-67. The engineering and allied industries in Calcutta were badly hit as industry in Bengal had a very narrow base. Retrenchments were postponed by the employers in 1966 because they wished to ease the industrial climate for the Congress during the 1967 elections.

The election results went against the Congress and the lay offs started. Employment fell by 300,000 between March 1966 and June 1967. The workers retaliated with gheraos. Secondly, there was resentment among labour due to the unwillingness of the wageboard to implement the recommendations of the wage board for the engineering industry. In a memorandum to the Union Labour Minister, the United Front attributed the current wave of unrest in the state to nonimplementation of the wage board's recommendations. The employer's arguments were that (1) the wage Board's recommendations were not

31 DESAI (Meghnad), op. cit., p. 41.

statutory, (ii) Wage increase should correspond with productivity, (iii) the industry was belaboured with financial difficulties.³²

Thirdly, a political reason for the labour unrest was the determined bid of left parties to extend their influence among labour. Leading constituents of the United Front, for example, the CPM and CPI benefitted from the labour unrest. Between March and September 1967, 591 trade unions were registered, 170 of these belonged to the CPM and 140 to the CPI. The Marxists did not originate the movement but realizing its potential, in building up party bases among the working class, it collaborated with the latter by preventing the use of police against the worker's participating in gheraos.

Only 12 per cent of these Gheraos were 'terminated' by police intervention and 16 per cent by search warrants. 31 per cent were ended by setting up bipartite conciliation machinery. The Ministry of Labour, which had always been an employer's mouthpiece, this time leaned towards the workers. (33)

Between March and August 1967, there were 1,018 cases of gheraos in 503 establishments. Out of the incidents that occurred, 85 per cent were in the districts of Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Howrah and Burdwan, Calcutta leading with 363 cases.

The impact of the high incidence of gheraos on the relations between the United Front partners was two dimensional. A lot of bad blood was created between parties like

32 TIMES OF INDIA, May 5, 1967.

33 DESAI (Meghnad), op. cit., p. 4.

CPM on one side and Bangla Congress, Praja Socialist Party, Forward Bloc on the other. The CPM assiduously encouraged the rumour that the Bangla Congress was behing the imminent flight of capital from the state. It is difficult to assess the truth or otherwise of such a statement but the result was the creation of a lot of tensions among the United Front constituents, which did not make for efficiency in government. Bangla Congress could not afford to take a clearly pro-employer stand for fear of alienating the urban working class, so Mukherjee had no other alternative but bide for time. ³⁴

Moreover, there were conflicts within the left parties themselves. The CPM alleged that because the SUC had no appreciable strength in the trade union movement, it was trying to use the Labour Portfolio for boosting up the party's position among the working class. The SUC, alleged, that CPM used gheraos in order to discredit the SUC Labour Minister. Probably, both the allegations are true, as the first tenure of the United Front was marked by aggressive base expansionist tactics, of which the CPM was not the only exponent.

4. Centre-State Contradictions

A study of the contradiction in the attitudes of the Central and state Government (of West Bengal) is attempted in the context of the Indian federal framework. This will include brief enumeration of the nature of Indian federalism and

TABLE 14

INDUSTRY-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF WORK STOPPAGES DURING
1967

Industry	No. of Stoppages	Men involved	Man-days lost
Tea	47	16,869	88,048
Cotton	29	9,612	282,341
Engineering (Major)	11	38,761	1,304,624
Engineering (Minor)	141	36,611	2,094,053
Iron and Steel	7	8,669	59,939
Chemical	6	4,198	119,265
Local Bodies	13	3,322	12,051
Transport	4	11,358	214,380
Miscellaneous	154	28,919	1,289,196
Total	447	169,259	6,118,816

Source: Labour in West Bengal, 1967 in GHOSH
(Shankar), op. cit., p. 96.

TABLE 15

NUMBER OF GHERAOS

Month	1967	1968	1969
January	--	1	2
February	--	1	5
March	32	2	33
April	132	3	36
May	151	4	83
June	100	5	45
July	97	4	59
August	95	3	58
September	199	3	62
October	4	2	78
November	2	2	29
December	4	-	27
Total	811	30	517

Source: Labour in West Bengal in GHOSH (Shankar),
op. cit., p. 96.

construction of a theoretical perspective of pre-1967 federal trends, implications of the 1967 elections and impact on the federal system.

The Indian federal system was inspired by an unique combination of forces that existed at the time when the Indian Constitution was in the process of being created. The main concern of the leading figures of the constituent assembly was to provide the legal framework for the governance of India and lay the foundations of national power. Thus, the Indian Federation has been described as 'federal in form but unitary in spirit'. In the words of K.V. Rao "they have succeeded in creating a very strong Centre and making it work as an unitary state, so much so, that the states have become mere administrative units carrying on the policy and dictates of the Centre.

In constructing a theoretical perspective on the pre-1967 period, some factors are important, Firstly, in the twenty year period between 1947 and 1967, the Congress Party's electoral record was never without a blemish. The most notable exception was Kerala, where after the 1957 elections, the Communist Party of India (CPI) formed a coalition government.

Secondly, this period was not marked by open discussions and defiance of the union government territory by the states. This was due to two factors - "dominance of one party in power both

35 RAO (K.V.), Parliamentary Democracy in India, Calcutta, 1961, pp. 225-36.

at Centre and states and extraordinary national leadership
³⁶
of Nehru".

Thirdly, in the late fifties and early sixties, students of federalism noted the element of competition in the political system, the bargaining for more resources from the Centre for development was viewed as an inherently healthy trend. Professor Morris Jones, surveying the impact of planning observed: "The upshot as regards plan formulation seems a convincing form of cooperative federalism. Whereas, the emphasis in the constitution is on demarcation that of practical relations is
³⁷
of cooperative bargaining". The bargaining capacities of each of the states in the union differed. The dynamics of federalism revealed an uniform pattern of union-state relations. Fourthly, the dominance of the Congress at the Centre and in the state did not mean that the Central leadership always had its say in all matters, there was also the "hard cases" of strong central leaders who succeeded in having their own way. K.V. Rao, relates in his article. The Governor at work, how B.C. Roy, then Chief Minister of Bengal opposed the appointment on non-Bengalis as Governors and thus successfully
³⁸
insisted on Dr. H.C. Mukherjee and Padmaja Naidu.

36 (A) The Union-State Relations at Crossroads - a paper read at the Seminar on Union-State Relations in India, Simla, May 1969.

37 MORRIS-JONES (W.H.), The Government and Politics of India, London, 1964, p. 143.

38 RAO (K.V.), "The Governor at Work", in the Journal of the Society for Study of State Governments, vol.3, 1969, Varanasi Society for Study of State Governments, p. 88

Among the sources of state independence, Franda mentions "a high degree of politicization was combined with regional tradition to produce a situation in which a large segment of the population is highly conscious of the separate cultural identity of the Bengalis".³⁹

The implications of the 1967 elections for the Indian Federal~~ist~~ System can be enumerated as follows:

- (i) The 1967 elections marked a point when the open ventilation of grievances by the state became the order of the day. Even though Congress 'hegemony' was never complete, it had never been faced with electoral defeats of the magnitude of 1967.
- (ii) The political system ceased to conform to the constitutional form of centralized federalism. Previously, with the Congress, having more or less a monopoly of power in the states and always in the Centre, intra-party coalition was the established mode of governance - after the 1967 elections, inter-party coalitional governments were formed in the states.
- (iii) Much greater fluidity was in evidence. Cabinet Government was reduced to Shambles, through defections in a number of states.
- (iv) There was greater articulation of regional demands in the states. With the Congress losing its majority in several states, many tensions and strains in the operation of federal principles was the result.

39 FRANDA (Marcus), West Bengal and the Federalizing Process in India, Princeton: University Press, 1968, pp. 161-2.

(v) A divided central leadership faced an extremely determined opposition from the non-Congress Governments in power. This was dissipated later when massive cracks developed in their unity due to defections and misunderstandings between the partners in the alliance.

Even though conflicts between centre and states have always been a regular feature, an attempt will be made understand as to why West Bengal can be treated as a special case in the study of union-state relations, especially during the tenure of the first two United Front coalition governments. The union-state contradiction, in relation to West Bengal in 1967 developed as a result of the interplay of the following factors.

Firstly, different ideological composition of the state and Central Government.

Secondly, industrial unrest in West Bengal, which proved politically beneficial for the left parties in the 1967 elections.

Thirdly, mass movements in the countryside for the occupying of benami land by landless labourers.

Fourthly, the Naxalite movement in North Bengal.

Fifthly, infighting within the United Front ministry.

Points second and third have already been examined in the chapter, the others shall be dealt with here. Firstly, coming to the point of different ideological composition of the state and Central Government in 1967, it can be mentioned that the Indian political elite by and large, were of the opinion at the time of Indian independence, that the bourgeoisie

parliamentary system would be best suited to the Indian ethos.

Ranjit Sau is of the opinion,

For the last thirty years, it has witnessed its hypocrisy, abuse and effectiveness. The net results of hundreds of land reforms, legislations of laws and programmes to create a milieu for the common man to raise his head, of the promises to usher in the socialist pattern of society...are laid bare in full view of everyday. (40)

Such a system would not look too kindly on the emergence of a Government with significant 'leftist' participation in any of the states of the Indian Union. When the first United Front Government was formed in Bengal in 1967, the Indian political system was feeling threatened from all sides. As Meghnad Desai puts it -

From the mid-sixties Indian capitalism seemed to be in major trouble. Following defeat in the 1962 border war with China and the indecisive clash with Pakistan in 1965, the Indian Government greatly stepped up its military spending so that the military budget nearly quadrupled within the decade. In both 1965-66 and 1966-67, there were famines which compelled the government to import large quantities of wheat from the U.S. Inflation was accelerated and the balance of payment deficit soared. The rupee was devalued in 1966. In the general elections of 1967, the Congress Party emerged with a small majority of 46 seats after 20 years during which it had enjoyed a majority of nearly two-thirds of the Lok Sabha. (41)

In such a situation, the coming into power of a government with significant 'left' participation in West Bengal in

40 SAU (Ranjit), "West Bengal: A Freak of History or the Yenan of India" in Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 6/7, Trivandrum, January-February 1978.

41 DESAI (Meghnad), op. cit., pp. 11-12.

1967 was very unwelcome. The Centre's concern for the state was political in nature. West Bengal occupies a very strategic position. Moreover, there is a feeling at the Centre that the disease that has afflicted West Bengal will spread to the neighbouring states in course of time if the virus is not

checked. ⁴² So intense was the anxiety that Dharmavira was specifically sent from Haryana to take over as Governor of West Bengal before the first U.F. Government assumed office, to keep a watchful eye on the latter.

The Naxalite movement, which began on March 2, a day after the formation of the coalition ministry in West Bengal, was the second armed communist revolt, in India, Telengana being the first. It had a deep impact on the Centre-state relations are as follows:

It sharpened the Central Government's anxiety about West Bengal. The movement, with its setting in the strategic areas of Siliguri, Kharibari, Naxalbari, Phansidoea, could easily be considered as a re-enactment of the scene from China's own drama. With the movement being so near to the international boundaries of three states, Nepal, East Pakistan and Sikkim, facilitating outside help to the rebels, it could become a launching pad for an armed rebellion or a war of national liberation in India under the guidance of Mao Tse-tung. The Peking Radio considered it as the "front paw" of the revolutionary upsurge.

42 RAY (Ranajit), op. cit., p. 85.

The Naxalite uprising in North Bengal intensified the hostility between the constituents of the united front. The Bangla Congress could not be expected to look tolerantly on a scene of harrassment and sometimes physical violence on rich landholders. Naxalbari uprising was essentially one of seizure of land under the leadership of the Siliguri unit of the Kisan Sabha (the kisan organization of the CPM), an event which perturbed all those who benefitted from illegal occupation of land.

Besides, the Union Government regarded the Naxalite problem as a law and order problem as such within the jurisdiction of the State Government. To strengthen the hands of the state authorities, it prohibited the carrying of arms. This step generated a controversy, with most of the parties supporting the action and CPM opposing it on the ground that it was unwanted interference in the internal affairs of the state and with the customs of the tribal people.

Moreover, it gave rise to intraparty conflict within the CPM,

The peasant revolt in Naxalbari, led by CPM radicals in West Bengal, placed the CPM in an awkward dilemma; if the coalition ministry did not crush the uprising, it would invite dismissal by the federal government for failure to maintain law and order; but if it crushed the revolt the party would lay itself open to the charge of compromising with the bourgeoisie parliamentary system. (43)

43 RAM (Mohan), Communist Movement in India in Kathleen Gough and Hari Sharma edited Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia, New York, London, Monthly Review Press, 1973, pp. 345-6.

The CPM decided to suppress the uprising. The leaders and agitators were condemned as 'misguided' and the former were asked to disassociate themselves from it. When the agitators disobeyed the party directive, the extremists were expelled from the party for indulging in 'adventurism'. They did not form a new party immediately but functioned through loosely knit district, state and national committees which coordinated their activities.

After the formation of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) in mid 1969, the new party let loose its cadres on the CPM cadres - the latter were regarded as 'class enemies' also. 1969 and 1970 saw the CPM and the CPI (ML) indulging in a frenzy of terrorist attacks and murders against each other. The Naxalite movement, thus resulted in the second split of the original undivided Communist Party.

The infighting within the United Front Ministry and its gradual disintegration helped to pave the way of Central intervention. This was due to the fact that the hostility between the original PULF and ULF did not get dissipated even after the formation of the united front. The former People's United Left Fronts suspicions were not allayed by the CPM's policies related to Gherao, land movement, food procurement which they felt were motivated towards base expansionism. They suspected that the CPM and its satellite parties, "were out to exploit the legislature and the Government for strengthening their parties and for this purpose they were not hesitating

to attack members of other parties".⁴⁴

The CPM, on the other hand alleged that the Chief Minister and his supporters had entered into secret understanding with the Centre and were conspiring to overthrow the UF Government and then later form a new Government with the Congress.

Exist of the United Front Government and formation of Congress-PDF Coalition government was the result of a gradual erosion of the UF Ministry. But, the first United Front Government, during its tenure of almost nine months, did not relinquish office, without any achievements to its credit.

In per capita income, West Bengal maintained her first position till 1945. But after that it came down a place or two to stand seventh in 1965-66 after Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Assam. 'In per capita income West Bengal, which went down to the eight position among the states in 1966-67 under the Congress moved upto sixth position under the first United Front'.⁴⁵ This was no mean feat, taking into consideration the wave of strikes and industrial unrest, and landgrab movement that convulsed the state during this period. This creditable performance on the economic front, was to prove beneficial to the CPM Minister for Finance, Jyoti Basu.

The Finance Minister of United Front took over the

44 GHOSH (Shankar), op. cit., p. 77.

45 RAY (Ranjit), op. cit., p. 31.

management of the Calcutta Tramways Company, to the great satisfaction of workers and people in Calcutta. The British-owned Calcutta Tramways Company wished to raise the fare and when the state government demurred, it threatened to stop business in Calcutta and to liquidate the Company. Jyoti Basu's policy appealed to nationalist sentiments of the Bengal.

The CPM with an eye to the next elections, took advantage of its stewardship of the Finance Ministry to increase the emoluments of the State Government employees. Even though, this laid an additional burden of 9 crores every year on the exchequer, no party in the united front dared to raise an objection for obvious electoral reason. 'Basu also increased the dearness allowance for government employees and teachers and non-teaching staff in schools and colleges, rendered financial aid to municipalities and the Calcutta Corporation for enhancement of dearness allowance to the employees.⁴⁶

The CPM did not originate either the land movement or gherao movement but connived with them by preventing the use of the police against the poor peasants or workers. This was a departure from the Congress Party's policy which was to turn a Nelsonian eye to the activities of the propertied class. The CPM's policy of not suppressing the democratic and legitimate struggle of the people radicalized its image and Jyoti Basu became the party's most acclaimed mass leader. Certain

46 PREAMBLE: 32 Point Programme of the United Front Government in 1969 in Shankar Ghosh's The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal, Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1970, p. 307.

sections of the people, for e.g., peasantry in North Bengal and workers in the Calcutta Metropolitan District became more vocal and perhaps more assertive because they knew they could count on the government's sympathy. Gheraos and peasant movements in 1967 were symptoms of this awareness. In this context, also must be mentioned the United Front Government's decision to exempt the poor peasants from grain procurement policies. The CPM reaped the benefits from all the above mentioned concessions, as is evident by scrutinizing the results of the 1969 polls in the state.

Fifthly, CPM's control of the portfolio of Refugee Rehabilitation enabled it to extend its support base among the displaced persons from East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) who form the 'floating population' in Calcutta and other towns of West Bengal. It took up the cause of the displaced persons from East Pakistan and submitted an 11-point plan for approval of the Union Government, it distributed nearly 2,500 letters of legibility for squatters' colonies, arranged for electricity in over 6,000 refugee households, installed over 400 tubewells in refugee colonies, etc. All this good work done by the CPM was to pay it rich dividends in the 1969 elections.

The Congress Party's attempts to bring down the United Front Government began in June, but without immediate success. In September, Gulzarilal Nanda visited Calcutta and Dharmavira, Governor of West Bengal arranged a meeting between Nanda, Mukherji, Kabir and Prafulla Sen. Mukherji was offered Chief Ministership of a Congress led coalition, without communist

participation.

On October 2, the army was also alerted. But a rebellion within the Bangla Congress, in which 20 legislators decided to disown Mukherjee for conducting 'secret negotiations' with the Congress Party, made him change his mind. The chain of events that followed drew the tenure of the United Front Ministry, to an end. About nine days later, seventeen legislators defected from the United Front.

Governor Dharmavira asked the Chief Minister to convene a session of the Assembly by November 21 to test the majority of the United Front Government. The United Front suggested a date six months later but the ministry was dismissed on November 21 on the ground that it had lost the support of the majority of the Assembly. On November 21, P.C. Ghosh's Progressive Democratic Front, a party of defectors formed the Government. By the 9th of January, the Congress Parliamentary Board meeting at Hyderabad formally decided to extend Congress support to the P.D.F. Ministry.

But the Congress-P.D.F. Coalition could not survive for more than three months. The factors that contributed to its dismissal were:

Firstly, there was infighting within the Congress Party in the state. Ashutosh Ghosh, who had played a major role in installing the PDF ministry became estranged as he was gradually eased out of the political limelight. P.C. Ghosh preferred to communicate directly with Congress leaders like P.C. Sen and Atulya Ghosh.

Secondly, pressure was generated from the Centre against the Congress-PDF coalition. Political manoeuvrings had commenced in order to ease out Sen and Atulya Ghosh in favour of Ashutosh Ghosh and Siddhartha Shankar Ray. Atulya Ghosh, in a press Conference in Delhi said, "The move to break up the Congress-PDF coalition has its source in New Delhi. Otherwise why should the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister take the trouble to meet the relatively, unknown ⁴⁷ 'Political emissaries' of Mr. Ashutosh Ghosh".

Thirdly, the speaker, Bejoy Kumar Bannerjee's ruling that the dismissal of the United Front ministry and the installation of the PDF ministry without a trial of strength in the Assembly was unconstitutional, created a constitutional crisis. The House was adjourned for an indefinite time, with the result that no business could be transacted. Another attempt was made to summon the Assembly session but without any success. Legal juggling by constitutional pundits to bypass the speaker's ruling failed. Similar was the fate of attempts to persuade the speaker to modify his stand.

In the meantime, the disgruntled Ashu Ghosh was doing all that he could to shorten the life of the Congress-PDF Ministry. He engineered defections in his own party and carloads of defectors were sent to Raj Bhavan as proof of the loss of majority of the Congress/PDF Government. The United Fronts position was that they would prevent the Assembly from

47 SENGUPTA (Barun), op. cit., p. 87.

sitting as the speaker's Ruling had ruled the Government as unconstitutional. In the prevailing situation, it was inevitable that President's Rule should be imposed on January 1968.

Chapter III

PRESIDENT'S RULE AND THE SECOND UNITED FRONT (1968-1970)

In this Chapter, the aim will be to study the various political and constitutional issues that were thrown up during the tumultuous days of the tenure of the second United Front. The Chapter has been divided into two sections. The first section will include an enunciation of the record of the first one year period of President's Rule (January 1968 to February 1969), immediately prior to the second United Front ministerial tenure; an attempt will be made to study the political issues that confronted the electorate in the 1969 Assembly Polls and the implications of the election results.

The second section will include a delineation of the contradictions that were inherent or developed during the brief tenure of the second United Front Government and the ultimate disintegration and collapse of the first United Front coalitional experiment.

Section A. - PRESIDENT'S RULE AND THE 1969 ELECTIONS

The two separate issues have been linked together in this section because two salient features of President's Rule became combustible propaganda material for the United Front in their efforts to condemn the Congress Party during campaigning for the 1969 elections. The above mentioned two features were:

1. The resentment in the state that President's Rule was 'misused' by the Governor, Dharmavira, to subvert the UF

Government, in collaboration with the Centre.

11. In order to improve the image of the Congress Party, Dharmavira resorted to certain short-term measures for example, increased food supplies. These failed to have the expected impact. The UF made political capital out of the so-called 'appeasement' policy of 'bribing' the people by more food supplies.

1. The Period of President's Rule

Dharmavira, Governor of West Bengal and the Congress High Command in New Delhi played into the hands of the communist parties by dismissing the United Front Government and installing a puppet regime in its place. The first term of President's Rule in West Bengal did not create a political climate conducive to the rehabilitation of the Congress Party in the state.

Dharmavira lent a sympathetic ear to the woes of the big bourgeoisie in Bengal.

Dharmavira used his baten against trade unions and other mass organizations and at the same time patronised the employers. Hoarders and profiteers enjoyed Government patronage. As many as 78,000 workers were rendered jobless due to lock-outs and closures in the engineering industry. More than 48,000 workers lost their jobs in the jute industry due to retrenchment. Several hundred employees were retrenched from the foreign aid companies. There was acute shortage of food and near famine conditions were seen in the vast rural areas. (1)

Dharmavira tried to appease the people by means of increased

1 ROYCHOWDHURY (Prafulla), West Bengal - A Decade 1965-75, Calcutta, Boipatra Publishers, 1977, p. 123.

food supplies. Jagjivan Ram, the then Union Food Minister, agreed to help Mr. Dharmavira. This was motivated by the desire to contrast the price stability during President's Rule with the phenomenal rise in price of rice, the staple diet of people in West Bengal; the price of the latter had risen to Rs.4 or 5 per kilo. Mr. Dharmavira has been quoted as saying, "Mr. Jagjivan Ram was good enough to allocate more rice to Bengal than had been allocated in the previous year.²

By the end of the year, it was felt that the short-term gains were petering off. Vain hopes remained that the United Front by its own disunity and mutual disputes had discredited itself with the electorate. Favourable intelligence reports also pointed to a testing of electoral strength. Finally, it was decided that West Bengal would go to the polls in early 1969.

2. The Electoral Battle of 1969

The political parties that threw themselves into the electoral fray were committed to various policies. The main participants were the United Front, Congress Party, parties that appealed to the communal and chauvinistic sentiments of the electorate for example, Jahagir Kabir's Banglar Jatiya Dal, the Proutist Party, better known as Amra Bangali (we Bengalis), the Progressive Muslim League, Jana Sangh, etc. and parties like the Indian National Democratic Front of Ashu Ghosh and the Lok Dal of Humayun Kabir aspired to provide the

political alternative to the Congress/United Front. The last 2 categories shall be dealt with briefly here, as this was the first election in which so many communal and sectarian parties were participating in the polls.

According to the calculations of the political parties, the Congress could rely upon 35 per cent of the electorate, and the United Front on 25 per cent of the votes. The rest constituted the 'floating' votes. Thus, the endeavours of the other parties were directed to winning over this category of voters. These parties were communal or parochial in nature. Some of the more notable ones have been enumerated as follows:

- (i) Jahangir Kabir, formed the Banglar Jatiya Dal, when prevented by the Bangla Congress from joining the United Front. Its main appeal was to the regional and chauvinistic ideas of the Bengalis. Besides, it appealed also to the Muslim voters.
- (ii) The other party which tried to make capital of Bengali chauvinism was the Proutist Party or Amra Bangali (we Bengalis). It demanded a separate state called Bengalistan, comprising Bengali speaking areas of West Bengal, Tripura, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, East Pakistan, Burma and Nepal. It demanded special constitutional provisions for West Bengal like Jammu and Kashmir.
- (iii) Along with regional parties, communal parties, received a new impetus in the 1969 elections. The Progressive Muslim League was created by the Forward Bloc, as a means to deflect the Muslim support to the Congress Party. Sekandar Ali, the man who organized the Progressive Muslim League, remained a

Forward Bloc member.

The Progressive Muslim League demanded Urdu to be recognized as an official language and adequate representations of Muslims in all services. It also demanded a separate Muslim district in West Bengal.

(iv) Jana Sangh could not make its presence felt in West Bengal. It was popular during the life-time of Mr Shyam Prasad Mukherjee, its founder. But, after the first General Elections of 1952 when it won 9 seats, its popularity dwindled considerably. But, in the 1969 elections, it again laid its electoral claims on the electorate

(v) Unlike the above-mentioned parties, parties like the Lok Dal of Humayun Kabir, and Indian National Democratic Front of Mr. Ashu Ghosh, nurtured ambitions of providing the alternative to both the Congress and the United Front. They rationalized that there would be a considerable number of people who were alienated from both the Congress and the United Front. They calculated that in the event of both the main rivals, Congress and the United Front, failing to get a majority, they would be able to provide the balancing force in West Bengal politics.

The election campaigns of the United Front and the Congress Party were a study in contrast. Political compulsions acting as motivating factors were strong enough to keep the United Front together, at least, till the polls. The Congress Party was organizationally so weak that the United Front could improve its electoral performance vis-a-vis the Congress.

After having experienced nine months of political power,

the United Front partners were naturally desirous of returning to its former position. They were well aware that by themselves, they would be no match for the Congress Party which even in 1967 had polled a much higher percentage of votes than any constituent of the United Front. Therefore, the United Front parties adopted the policy of safety in numbers.

Ominous signs of a rejuvenation of the Congress political image seemed to be appearing on the political horizon:

Congress politicians who had been practically unable to hold public meetings in Calcutta since 1966 were drawing sizeable crowds. The people would listen quietly to their criticism of the United Front - the disastrous effects of labour unrest on industry, the deterioration of the law and order situation and the record rise in rice prices. (3)

The resounding victory of the Congress over an independent candidate supported by the U.F. in the bye-election to the Lok Sabha from Krishnanagar constituency appeared to indicate that the Congress had been able to rehabilitate itself with the electorate, due to the lapses of the United Front.

A section of the CPM, roughly 20 per cent, were pressurizing the party leadership for a more militant policy. The leadership's reply was 'a more militant parliamentary policy, combining parliamentary and extra parliamentary struggles to win tactical victories'.⁴ A victory at the polls was necessary

3 GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal 1967-70, Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1971, p. 128.

4 SENGUPTA (Bhabani), Communism in Indian Politics, Delhi, Young Asia Publication, 1978, p. 234.

to vindicate - the 'political line' enunciated by the CPM leadership.

Thus, a politically delicate issue like allocation of seats to the constituent parties was settled with surprising ease. It was decided that the seats won by the United Front parties in 1967 should be retained by the respective parties, while the lost seats should be allotted on the basis of performance. The problem of allocation of seats from constituencies where members had defected was resolved by the principle that the seats should be considered those of the party and not of the individual members. In this way, an important and sensitive member like the Bangla Congress was appeased and participation guaranteed.

Political differences and personal animosities among the United Front parties were kept under control as far as it was politically possible. The U.F. unity vis-a-vis the Congress was maintained so effectively that the division among the left parties could not be taken advantage of by the Congress for its own ends. Thus, the U.F. campaigning was more politically oriented.

Whenever the village asked for commitments, the U.F. men would assure that democracy could not be made a purchaseable commodity and that they would protect the poor man's interests. They emphasized the fact that the U.F. candidates were poor men like themselves, so as to facilitate the process of identification with the U.F. candidates. The U.F. did all they could to

5 BASU (Sajal), West Bengal - The Violent Years, Calcutta, Prachi Publications, 1974, p. 59.

expose the political bankruptcy of the Congress Party, in relation its role in dismissing the first united front regime. They tried to convince the voters that their democratic character was more genuine than that of the Congress Party.

The United Front campaigners were not averse to taking course to playing upon the casteist sentiments of the electorate - it was their last trump card.

Organizationally, the United Front was in a very commanding position. According to Sajal Basu,

A well-linked chain of functionaries from the village 'anchal' to the district level, worked to activate the electoral campaign against the Congress Party. It initiated the electioneering machinery by entrusting anchalwise responsibilities to the persons, well known in the area. From the outset, the U.F. stressed mainly on mobilising the booth agents and village volunteers. Canvassing materials were a personal appeal to the electorate, postering and distribution of small handbills for popularising the symbol. (6)

Though much of the organizational hierarchy remained inactive for some time, it started functioning very effectively, in the crucial ten days before the state went to the Polls.

All these advantages notwithstanding, there was a strong element of uncertainty about the outcome of the polls.

According to the Economic and Political Weekly,

The results of 1967 had been partially influenced by the impulsive reaction of a section of the rural gentry, who had deserted the Congress to join hands with some left parties, out to spite P.C. Sen's procurement policy. A section of big business under the

influence of Swatantra Party had also taken a rather lukewarm attitude to Congress. But in 1969, Swatantra Party was out of the race and decided discreetly to back the Congress. Along with P.C. Ghosh, a section of the Jotedars had returned to the Congress fold. The disintegration of the Bangla Congress into six or seven parts, i.e. (i) the part that has returned to Congress fold (ii) Lok Dal led by Humayun Kabir (iii) part that joined Ashu Ghosh's INDF (iv) those that flocked to Progressive Muslim League (v) National Party led by Jehangir Kabir (vi) residue, with Ajay Mukherjee, also is a negative factor. (7)

The Congress Party went to the polls, so confident of its success that it reverted to its old policy of no coalition with the result that P.C. Ghosh went back to the Congress, while Humayun Kabir stayed outside. But the Congress Party in Bengal was faced with disadvantages, to which it had no answer.

The Congress Party was faced with a struggle for leadership, during a period when the situation required unity. The poison of disunity percolated from the top layer to the lowest strata of the organizational hierarchy. Factionalism was rampant to the extent that the anti-Atulya Ghosh group leader joined hands with a R.S.P. leader, who defeated the provincial Congress President in Sealdah constituency.⁸

It failed to project itself as a party with a positive political programme. It could not counter the United Front charge of plotting with the Centre to dismiss the first Government. The Congress tried to highlight the issues of failure by the United Front, it is internal dissensions, its

7 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. IV, no. 5, Bombay, February 1, 1969, p. 277.

8 BASU (Sajal), op. cit., p. 65.

contributions to increasing chaos and anarchy, failure to tackle the food problem, rise in rice prices and other essential commodities, etc.

There was hardly any attempt by the Congress to give an answer to the United Front attacks against the Centre. Besides, there was no mention of a new positive policy if it would be returned to the Assembly. Neither was there any evaluative approach about the contributions they had made and the ideas they wanted to concretize through the state machinery. Thus, this negative approach to campaigning failed to turn the political tide in their favour.

Moreover, the Congress Party's policy of offering some last minute concessions, for schools, tubewells, to appease the electorate, was exposed by the United Front. The United Front activists convinced the people that such temporary measures would not solve their basic problems but pave the way for more exploitation in the future. The people were requested that a second chance should be given to the United Front, to deliver the goods.

The organizational framework was too top-heavy and impersonal to make a deep impression upon the people. According to Sajal Basu,

Congress activities usually began with a car. Just one month before the elections, the candidate surrounded by their lieutenants, began visiting the villages and its elites, would listen to their grievances and demands and then chalk out the mode of influencing; whether through influencing the head of a community or donating for a school building, etc. Besides, Congress had its cadres in almost every anchal or village, who would be

contacted and consulted as the way of influencing the different sections. Excessive dependence on this process, brought their organization to a dead end. The top heavy organizational patterns naturally failed to touch the masses at the lowest level. That is why the Congress, in spite of its much superior resources and mobility, suffered miserably against the U.F., which emerged from the general masses and was more communicative with the voters than the Congress. (9)

Thus, the unity of the United Front was maintained during the 1969 elections. It was only after the conclusion of the latter that the inherent contradictions became manifest.

The 1969 election results were a surprise for both the United Front and the Congress, as well as for other politically ambitious minor parties. The United Front had expected about 140 to 180 seats in an Assembly of 280. But the United Front's haul of 214 seats was an unprecedented victory.

The CPM improved its performance in 1969 from 43 to 80 seats, and so became the party with the largest number of seats and consequently potential power. The CPI also did better than in 1967 with 30 seats and so among the major left parties, in Bengal, it occupied the second place, after the CPM. Another left party which made some gains was the Forward Bloc with 21 seats followed by the Revolutionary Socialist Party with 12 seats. Among the 'rightist' parties, in the United Front, the Bangla Congress was the strongest with 33 seats and second to the CPM in the United Front. The results of 1969 elections came as a severe shock to the Congress. There was a sharp decline from 127 to 55 seats in the Assembly,

though the Congress polled three lakh votes more than in the fourth general elections.

The parties, which tried to project themselves as the third force in Bengali politics were disappointed. The Jana Sangh, Swatantra, Lok Dal, Banglar Jatiya Dal and the Proutist Party were ^{un}successful in getting even one candidate elected. But the Progressive Muslim League opened its account with 3 seats; the Indian National Democratic Front won one seat. Its leader, Ashutosh Ghosh was defeated in all the three constituencies from which he sought elections. 5 Praja Socialist candidates were elected, but as four of them had alliances with the United Front, they joined the latter, raising its strength to 218.

The success of the United Front at the polls in 1969, can be linked to the simmering discontent at their gradual impoverishment that has been felt by the poor masses in India in general and in Bengal in particular. The fruits of economic development, they feel, have been snatched by the rich, while the poor have been denied their benefits. This fact together with politicization of the poor by political parties have created an explosive political situation. A survey conducted by the Indian Institution of Public Opinion finds among the poor,

a major loss of confidence...in the prospects of economic justice within their generation. The erosion of the Congress popular vote of 3 per cent between 1957 and 1962, practically all could be accounted for by the vote of the really poor and

TABLE 16

PARTY POSITION IN WEST BENGAL ASSEMBLY - 1967 to 1969
ELECTIONS

	<u>1967</u>	<u>1969</u>
Congress	127	55
CPI (M)	43	80
CPI	16	30
Bangla Congress	34	33
Forward Bloc	13	21
SSP	7	9
PSP	7	5
RSP	6	12
SUC	4	7
Worker's Party	2	2
Gorkha League	2	4
Lok Sevak Sangh	5	4
Forward Bloc (Marxist)	1	1
RSPI	--	2
Jana Sangh	1	--
Swatantra	1	--
Independent	11	11
Progressive Muslim League	--	3
Independents	--	1
	<hr/>	<hr/>
Total	280	280
	<hr/>	<hr/>

Source: GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal: 1967-70, Calcutta, 1971, p. 139.

TABLE 17

VALID VOTES POLLED BY DIFFERENT PARTIES IN THE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN THE
MID-TERM POLL IN 1969 AND IN THE GENERAL ELECTION 1967 TO THE ASSEMBLY
AND MID-TERM ELECTION 1969

Parties	Mid-Term Poll 1969		General Election 1967	
	No. of valid votes polled	Percentage	No. of valid votes polled	Percentage
Congress	5,542,286	41.33	5,207,468	41.11
CPI (M)	2,671,833	19.93	2,247,309	17.74
CPI	916,353	6.83	801,291	6.32
Bangla Congress	1,117,140	8.33	1,325,865	10.40
Forward Bloc	671,689	5.01	533,022	4.21
RSP	381,312	2.86	287,315	2.26
SSP	246,787	1.86	269,234	2.13
Socialist Unity Centre	202,721	1.53	154,084	1.21
RCPI	50,370	0.39	21,282	0.16
Forward Bloc (M)	27,143	0.21	69,670	0.54
Worker's Party	47,391	0.36	47,950	0.38
Bolshevik Party	--	--	25,905	0.24
Independent (UF Supported)	280,596	2.09	--	--
Lok Sevak Sangh	299,844	0.76	85,269	0.67
Gorkha League	71,665	0.54	50,365	0.40

(Table Contd.)

Parties	Mid-Term Poll 1969		General Election 1967	
	No. of valid votes polled	Percentage	No. of valid votes polled	Percentage
PSP	175,881	1.32	242,232	1.94
Jana Sangh	125,224	0.94	182,459	1.44
Swatantra	8,926	0.07	97,150	0.77
Hindu Mahasabha	20,058	0.16	44,173	0.35
Republican Party	10,796	0.09	1,253	0.01
Lok Dal (a)	131,782	0.98	--	--
National Party of Bengal	37,492	0.28	--	--
Indian National Democratic Front	120,018	0.89	--	--
Proutist Party	35,352	0.27	--	--
Progressive Muslim League	199,045	1.34	--	--
Independent	217,117	1.63	970,766	7.66

Source: West Bengal Congress in GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1967-70, p. 138.

TABLE / 8

DISTRICTWISE RESULTS OF THE CONGRESS AND THE
U. P. IN MID-TERM POLL IN 1969

District	Total Seats	United Front		Congress	
		Contested	Won	Contested	Won
Coochbehar	8	8	2	8	6
Jalpaiguri	11	11	4	11	7
Darjeeling	5	5	4	5	1
West Dinajpur	11	11	6	11	3
Malda	10	10	5	10	5
Murshidabad	18	18	9	18	5
Nadia	14	14	9	14	5
24 Parganas	50	50	45	50	4
Calcutta	23	23	13	23	5
Howrah	16	16	15	16	1
Hooghly	18	18	16	18	2
Midnapur	35	31	25	35	6
Purulia	11	11	8	11	3
Bankura	13	13	13	13	0
Burdwan	25	25	23	25	2
Birbhum	12	12	12	12	0
Total	280	276	214	280	55

Source: GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1971, p. 140.

destitute. There appears to be a polarization of political effects caused by the factors of well-to-do and poverty within the wide canvas of the political spectrum represented by India's multiparty system.(10)

What is true of India applies more accurately to West Bengal. The alienation of the poor in Bengal was motivated by certain factors, the basic being the emergence of India as a sovereign state. The loss of the fertile agricultural districts of undivided Bengal, the compulsion to grow jute for its jute mills and the resulting food deficit, the refugee problem, the pressure on the land and stagnancy in agriculture, lack of industrial growth, unemployment and the resultant social tensions, the takeover of the economy by non-Bengalis, hostility against the Centre for alleged indifference to the problems of Bengalis, overcrowding in urban areas, chief of them being Calcutta, a long tradition of political militancy, etc. have contributed to make the Bengali poor feel a deep sense of deprivation and destitution. Thus the poor masses of Bengal have shown a tendency to drift towards the communist parties, notably after 1967. The communist parties have tried to mobilize the peasantry by actively associating them with the implementation of land reform measures. During this period (the tenure of the First United Front Government), the land that had been legally vested in the government but was yet in the possession of the jotedars were actually taken possession of and distributed. The First United Front had

also exempted poor peasants from grain procurement policies. The Communist ^{parties} have also assisted the struggle of the working class in the cities by preventing the use of police in breaking up strikes and gheraos against the employers.

The United Front became a symbol of their aspirations. According to Shankar Ghosh,

It fared well whenever it based its election campaign on this class antagonism. In North Bengal the Congress could do well because the United Front electioneering there laid more stress on the inadequacy of relief and rehabilitation measures in the flood ravaged areas. (11)

Another factor that played a major role in the electoral success of the United Front in 1969 was the existence of a comprehensive alliance against the Congress. According to Weiner and Usgoodfield,

Had the United Front not existed and had the CPM lost the 16 seats it won as a result of the Front, the CPM could not have emerged as the largest party in the West Bengal Assembly in 1969...the Congress was the party which finished second in each constituency in which a vital transfer took place. Except for the transfer, Congress would have won these constituencies and ended up with 71 seats to the CPM's 64. It is relevant that none of the parties transferring vital support to the CPM (the CPI, Bangla Congress, Forward Bloc) had been allied with the CPM in 1967. (12)

By committing the political blunder of dismissing the United Front Ministry, 3 weeks before the date proposed by the latter for summoning the Assembly, the Congress walked into

11 GHOSH (Shankar), op. cit., p. 69.

12 WEINER (Myron) and USGOODFIELD (John), Communist Parties of West Bengal, New Delhi, Manohar Book Service, 1974, p. 63.

the trap laid by the left parties. Apart from being the party which used the police power on behalf of the landlord and the industrial employer it earned the stigma of having played a major role in dismissing a popular ministry. The Congress found it difficult to make a plausible excuse, while the United Front felt free to make political capital on this issue.

Another factor that contributed to the victory of the United Front was the heightened political consciousness of the electorate. According to the Economic and Political Weekly,

The Progressive Muslim League has bagged 3 seats but 30 of its 40 candidates lost their deposits as the majority of Muslim voters evidently voted on political lines. Hindu Mahasabha candidates lost their deposits in all the constituencies it contested. The rallying of religious and linguistic minorities behind the United Front is as much a recognition of its unifying role during its last term in the state administration as a promise of healthy democratic development in the future. Naxalites had been rebuffed with a larger turnout of voters at 68 per cent in 1969, as against 63 per cent in 1967. (13)

The left parties in the UF also succeeded in ousting the Congress from the Asansol-Raniganj-Durgapur area in the sprawling industrial belt on both banks of the Gange, in which industrial workers constitute in majority of the population.

According to the Economic and Political Weekly, the implications are:

- (1) persistent isolation of Hindi speaking workers has ended.

13 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. IV, no. 8, February 22, 1969, p. 384.

- (11) consolidation of Hindi speaking workers under communist leadership can further accelerate the process of radicalisation in home states. (14)

Section B. CATEGORIES OF CONTRADICTIONS AND THE
SECOND UNITED FRONT COALITION

Some political writers and commentators for e.g., Sajal Basu and Bhabani Sengupta speak of emergence of polarization between forces of 'right' and 'left' because the 1969 mid-term poll witnessed the forging of a pre-electoral alliance of left and democratic parties against the Congress. But the alliance was mainly one of political expediency. The constituents of the United Front alliance in 1969 did not dissolve their differences before combining in one party. The alliance, effected in 1969, was more a reflection of appreciation for each other's strength than of any feeling of goodwill or mutual cooperation.¹⁵ The U.F. unity was not monolithic, it was only a temporary alliance between traditional left forces and centrist elements, who had broken away from the Congress but whose ideological affinity with the parent organization was still close.

1. Inherent Contradictions

The presence of inherent contradictions can be confirmed by concentrating on two factors.

The 32 point minimum programme is itself a contradiction

14 Ibid., p. 385.

15 WEINER (Myron) and USGOODFIELD (John), op. cit., p. 45.

in terms. Apart from generalities, it combined a convenient recognition of the limitations of the constitution under which the U.F. Government would have to function which would prevent them from making a significant improvement in the life of the people, and at the same time, it promised the electorate, especially the depressed sections, economic benefits. It even went so far as to promise to impose suitable controls over the entire trade in foodgrains.

To quote briefly, the preamble to the United Front Minimum programme:

The Indian Constitution itself is a bar to any radical measure of social reconstruction and progress. It is heavily loaded in favour of the capitalists and big land-owners,... Moreover, the constitution imposes severe restrictions on the power of a state government, practically concentrating all power at the Centre. As long as the Congress continues in office at the Centre and is not ousted, no significant improvement can be brought about in the life of the people. (16)

It held out certain hopes before the electorate which, considering the class nature of the Indian State and Society, as they saw it would have been impossible to implement.

There was an inherent contradiction also between the United Front's promise to ameliorate the people's distress and the determination of the most important member of the coalition (so far as the number of seats won in the Assembly elections is concerned), i.e. the CPM to keep in mind its historic

16 PREAMBLE: 32-Point Programme of the Second United Front in GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State - A Study of West Bengal, 1967-70, Calcutta, 1971, p. 309.

responsibility of organizing the masses. Mr. Namboodripad thundered,

The ministers and leaders of the ruling Congress Party are living in a fool's paradise, if they think that discontent against the regime would not be channelised into an organized national struggle since there is not one single party to unify the opposition forces. (17)

Namboodripad's articles in the Malayee journal Deshabhimani, in the summers of 1968 were interesting in that they threw light on the political policies that the CPM would pursue within the United Front. They point to the basic differences in its political understanding vis-a-vis the other constituents of the non-Congress United Fronts, including the CPI.

Two kinds of ideological struggles were envisaged by the Marxists - within the United Front and outside the United Front. The purpose of joining the United Front coalition, according to the CPM, was to combine "administration and agitation", "agitation being important in terms of both state politics and state-central government relations".

The CPM admitted that "ideological conflicts will take place inside the United Front. The CPM could not betray the revolutionary working class movement, the "petty bourgeoisie ideology" of the CPI and other left parties made it all the more necessary for the Marxists to "expose" the dangers inherent in the ideology of the non-Marxist left. Apart from

17 NAMBOODRIPAD (E.M.S.), India Under Congress Rule, Calcutta National Book Agency, 1967, p. 8.

the CPM's differences with its rightist allies in the United Front, its quarrel was also with the CPI. The CPI's policy that administration and agitation cannot go together was anathema to the CPM. The CPI,

wanted the ministers to select from common programmes, a test of priorities and working within the limitations of the political system, to ameliorate the distress of the toiling people. What is required is the fixation of priorities on the twin yardstick of some relief to the people and attack on positions of vested interest. (18)

The basic difference between the CPM and CPI's theoretical understanding of the United Front coalition was that the CPI regarded it as a means to give relief to the people, while the CPM looked upon it "as a weapon of mass struggle", to make the rural and urban proletariat understand and fight 'exploitation'. In the post 1964 period the CPI and CPM have been competing with each other for expansion of support bases. The CPI, the weaker of the two, has felt safer in allying itself with the Congress Party. The CPM felt that its political survival and political future was linked with the degree of its identification with the urban and rural proletariat. Harekrishna Konar, the CPM's Minister for Revenue and Refugee Rehabilitation in the 1967 coalition ministry, went as far as to suggest that the struggle of the poor peasantry should get priority over the urban proletariat, keeping in mind the numerical predominance of the poor peasantry in relation to

the urban working class. Thus, compulsions of political survival sharpened the antagonisms between the two communist parties, which erupted in violent clashes among United Front constituents. As a result, the United Front was to fail to develop United struggle against the 'exploiters'.

Outside the United Front Government, as the CPM saw it, the chief opponent of the United Front coalition government, was the bourgeois-landlord dominated Central Government, with the result that conflict with the latter would be a necessary phase of the class or struggle. In doing so, the Marxists felt that the CPM would have to guard against 'elements' inside the United Front, who would oppose its policies. The above mentioned points combined to form the elaborate polemical system which formed the smokescreen behind which the CPM embarked on an aggressive policy to extend its mass base, and lay the foundation for a takeover of political power, on the basis of its own majority in the Assembly. Its decision to contest the elections as a member of the United Front alliance was motivated by the requirements of its strategy to use governmental power to extend its support base.

2. Ideological Contradictions

To fulfil the needs of clarity and lucidity of analysis, we have combined contradictions that developed due to the struggle for dominance between the constituent parties of the United Front and ideological contradictions that were exacerbated, due to the CPM instigated heightened peasant

militancy, that marked the second tenure of the United Front.

Tensions during ministry making were due to CPM's manoeuvrings and the resultant resentment of the other U.F. parties, during allocation of portfolios. It was during ministry making that contradictions between U.F. partners, due to struggle for dominance became apparent.

The 1969 elections found the CPM in a dominating position. With 30 seats in the Assembly, it was the largest party in the Assembly and stronger than the two other main parties of the United Front, the CPI and Bangla Congress.

According to Bhabani Sengupta,

The increased strength of the CPM was an indication of the expansion of its mass base. In the statewide mass movements against President's Rule in 1968, peasants had participated along with workers and middle class people. A significant number of CPM candidates in the 1969 elections were communists belonging to the lower class, the peasantry and the industrial proletariat. (19)

Therefore, the CPM concluded that it was the most appropriate time to mobilize the people and consolidate its influence. Increased legislative and mass support made it confident to make a determined bid for the leadership for the United Front Government.

The CPM, using its increased strength in the Assembly to bargain for ministries, most suited for mobilization of the rural and urban poor, staked its claim on the chief ministership and also on police and general administration. It asserted that it had "indisputable claim", to the chief ministership

as the single biggest partner of the United Front and also "as the consistent democratic opposition to the ruling Congress Party". In doing so, the CPM was going against Mr. Jyoti Basu's earlier statement to Governor Dharmavira that the Front was contesting the elections on the basis of a common programme and that a mutually agreed upon leader would head the government, if the United Front was voted to power. Mr. Basu made a complete volte face and refused to recognize Mr. Ajoy Mukherji's leadership.

The CPI and the Bangla Congress, together with parties like the Forward Bloc and Socialist Unity Centre regarded the electoral victory as the victory of the United Front as a whole. These parties were determined to check the CPM and deprive it of the crucial portfolios for e.g. Home, Police, and Chief Ministership. Soon, it became clear that while the CPM's demand for ^{the} Chief ministership was mainly to increase its bargaining power vis-a-vis its opponents, its chief motive was to control Home, Police, Land and Land Revenue, Labour, Education, etc. Thus, as soon as it could assume office, the United Front was faced with an almost insurmountable problem - the CPM was determined to control the ministries which would be helpful in mass mobilization and the CPI, Bangla Congress equally determined to prevent the same. The impasse was broken by the CPI's national leadership's direction to the Bengal unit of the CPI to accept the CPM's compromise solution which would give the Chief and Finance ministerships to Ajoy Mukherji of the Bangla Congress but Police and Administration

to Basu, who once again was designated as Deputy Chief Minister. The Bangla Congress and the Forward Bloc got in touch with Pramod Dasgupta of the CPM and conveyed their readiness for talks. Finally, the Bangla Congress dropped the Forward Bloc and came to a bilateral understanding with the CPM

The Chief Ministership and Finance went to the Bangla Congress, while Basu received Home and General Administration. As long as the Chief Ministership remained with the Bangla Congress, the latter was willing to make any concession to the CPM. It did not anticipate the manner in which the CPM would dilute the significance of that position at a later stage.

The CPM also obtained Land and Land Revenue, Labour, Education, Refugee Rehabilitation and Food (which it gifted to the RCPI).

Another major political gain for the CPM was the driving of a wedge between the Bangla Congress and its allies, the CPI and Forward Bloc. The amicable relationship between the Bangla Congress and the CPM was to remain intact for the ^{first} six months of the second U.F. ministry's tenure. Besides, getting the lion's share in ministries and politically outmanoeuvring its opponents, the CPM also played a major role in distributing portfolios among the less important parties. It supported the principle of giving representation at the level of state ministership to parties which had less than 2 members in the Assembly or none at all. Thus, the solitary MLA of the Forward Bloc (Marxist) and a representative of the Bolshevik Party

(which did not have any representation in the Assembly) were admitted into ministerial ranks. Needless to say, these were loyal supporters of the CPM.

Other small parties met with the CPM's resistance. The Socialist Unity Centre was one of the partners of the ^{CPM in the} United Front Government in 1967. Conflict between the SUC and CPM was due to firstly, the SUC had a strong base in the 24 Parganas but the Marxists were trying to decrease its importance in that area. Secondly, the SUC also earned the displeasure of CPM by supporting the claims of the Bangla Congress to the Chief Ministership and the Finance Portfolio.

The SUC's demand of the Labour Portfolio for Subodh Bannerjee met with strong resistance from the CPM. It claimed the Labour Portfolio for its own party. The SUC claimed, failing to get the Labour Portfolio, another important portfolio, probably Food. Finally, it had to be content with Public Works.

Another party which felt the wrath of the CPM was the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), its ally before 1967. The reason for the tension was because both the CPM and SSP were struggling to increase their strength in the coalfield areas, the SSP got little support from the CPM in relation to allocation of seats for the 1969 elections.

The SSP demanded 2 full Ministers on the strength of its 9 members in the Assembly. But, it was allotted one Minister and one minister of state on par with the SUC, which had only 7 members in the Assembly. Its demand of an important

ministry was not satisfied. In protest, the SSP refused to join the Cabinet, but remained within the United Front.

Labour Problem was not on the cards, as far as the second United Front Government was concerned as it had modified its stand on gherao. During the tenure of the first United Front, the policy was to support the gherao as an absolute right of the workers. The second United Front assumed office in 1969, after making massive promises to solve the problem of unemployment. Thus, it became necessary to encourage discipline of the labour force, so that greater industrial growth could be achieved, with a larger potential for generating employment.

The policy of police non-intervention was followed, but where gheraos became violent, the police was to rescue the victims.

The emphasis was greater on settlement of disputes between the workers and employers with the Government playing the role of the middlemen. However, with the exception of the engineering industry the negotiations between the Government and industrialists broke down. The Government, with an eye to the next elections, pressed for increase in wages if productivity was to increase also.

The efforts of the Government, notwithstanding, there were 281 cases of gheraos in the first five months of the ministry's life in industry, 34 in education, and 48 in the 'social sphere'. The breakdown of negotiations was marked by omnibus strikes which struck entire sectors ^{of} industry. Prolonged strikes occurred in 1969 in the jute, engineering and

plantation industries. According to Shankar Ghosh,

Not only did all leftist trade union organizations combine to launch these strikes, but the state unit of the Indian National Trade Union Congress also collaborated. The U.F. Government helped in these strikes in every way it could; this was in consonance with the policy of the second U.F. which regarded ^{the} strike as a far more powerful weapon than gherao. (20)

Gheraos and the strikes were conceived of as weapons against the employers but were used by the constituents of the UF against each other and also against ministers of the United Front. A number of cases of violence in industrial units were due to inter-union rivalry.

A glass factory in a Calcutta suburb was closed down to a serious clash inside the factory between a CPM and SUC Union in which 15 people were injured. In another clash over inter-union rivalry, a worker was stabbed in a factory at Durgapur. (21)

Matters came to a crisis when the Commerce and Industries Minister, Sushil Dhara, was gheraoed by some members of a Naxalite Union, at the Jaldakha hydro-electric project of the State Electricity Board in Darjeeling district. Dhara started a "fast to death" as a protest; later on had to be rescued by the police. The Bangla Congress took the opportunity thus obtained to criticize gherao, as an instrument of labour militancy. The CPM, which had its base among industrial workers, maintained that the U.F. could not deprive the workers of this small right.

20 GHOSH (Shankar), op. cit., p. 183.

21 Ibid., p. 173.

On the issue of land reforms, the second United Front Ministry went far ahead of its predecessor. The architect of the Land Policy was Land and Revenue Minister, Harekrishna Konar. There were certain political compulsions that dictated a radical land policy.

The tenure of the second United Front ministry coincided with the emergence of CPI (ML) as a political party. The Marxist-Leninist Party claimed to be a revolutionary party as against the bourgeois character of the CPM. The former thus laid a stake on the loyalties of the poor peasantry. The CPM's land policy and peasant movement was the political counter offensive launched against the Naxalite Movement. The CPM wanted to prove that its revolutionary credentials were still intact. The Naxalite upsurge in 1967 was one of the factors that highlighted the importance of mobilization of the rural oppressed.

By mid-1968, the CPM admitted that it was concentrating on the rural poor. At the 19th conference of the West Bengal Kisan Sabha on June 1968, Harekrishna Konar, President of the state All India Kisan Sabha, admitted "significant advances" in the peasant movement, which had now spread to "new areas on each district". When the United Front returned to power, the CPM was the largest party in the Assembly, though it did not have an absolute majority of its own; it decided to use the governmental machinery to further expand its mass base. According to Bhabani Sengupta,

As a Marxist, Konar's objective could not be just to give each poor peasant an acre of land, if even if he had that much land to distribute. In activizing the rural proletariat for a limited immediate objective, Konar was also trying to build the CPM base among the village poor for the purpose of a future revolution. (22)

In 1969, the land reform laws like the West Bengal Land Reform Act, 1955, and the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act 1953 were in operation. But due to inadequacies of the administrative machinery and political influence of landowning classes, the land reforms were allowed to remain on paper. In the pre-1967 period, much of the land which was formally vested in the state, remained in with the landlord and very little land was distributed. Konar essentially tried to achieve two objectives, i.e. distribute the land already vested with the state and detect the benami land and distribute it among the poor peasants. While doing this, he wished to break the grip that the rural vested interests exercised in the countryside and consolidate the CPM's influence among the rural poor. In this context, conflict with the Bangla Congress was a foregone conclusion.

Within ninety days after the second United Front ministry took office, Konar circulated a draft legislation lifting land revenue on 3 acres or less in single possession, and increasing the revenue on land above 7 acres. False declarations were made cognizable offense, punishable with 3 months simple punishment or a fine upto Rs.1,000.

The formation of the second United Front Government in 1969 saw the hightide of peasant movement sweep the entire countryside with unprecedented speed.

The petitioning attitude of the earlier period was discarded. The slogan of occupying khas (vested) land gained new momentum. The drive to detect and cancel malafide transfers were intensified. But this time this drive for finding out benami land was not confined to Government efforts only, the peasants came forward too. The land which the Government had not taken possession and there was doubt as to whether it would be able to do so, was occupied by the peasantry. (23)

No official figures were available either of the total area of benami and illegally held land, recovered in the course of the peasant movement. But, in 24 Parganas district, where the movement was stronger than in any other places, roughly about one-third of the land suspected by the Government to be illegally held by the landowners had been occupied by the poor peasants. An unofficial estimate is that about 3 lakh acres of benami land had been recovered.

Another target of occupation by landless workers was fisheries in 24 Parganas district. One of the favourite methods of evading the 25 acres limit per individual, was to convert surplus land into fisheries. The peasant's method of recovering such land was to destroy embankments, release water and loot the fish. The looting of fish had assumed such proportions that Jyoti Basu declared that the Government would

23 GHOSH (R.) and NAGARAJ (K.), Land Reforms in West Bengal, in Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 617, January-February 1978, p. 57.

not tolerate looting of fish in any form.

The United Front Government also came down heavily upon tea plantations. It appointed two committees for Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts to determine the amount of excess land held by plantation owners.

Apart from the excesses committed in the name of land for peasants, the manner in which it was organized, created a lot of tensions among the United Front partners.

Firstly, instead of taking its UF partners along with and uniting to achieve common objectives the CPM succeeded in alienating them. They also harboured resentment that Konar as Land and Revenue Minister was taking undue advantage of his position to expand the influence of his party, at the expense of the others. As the principal organizer of his party's peasant front, Konar became an excellent link between the department he headed and the organization he controlled.

Whenever the department found that some land was being held in excess of the ceiling permitted by the law or land already vested in the Government had been resumed by its former owner, word travelled to the peasant organizations, i.e. Kisan Sabha. Simultaneously, with the serving of notice by the department on the owner to transfer the land to the Government, the peasants under the leadership of the local peasant organization occupied it. (24)

It was alleged by the other parties that the peasants who benefitted from the land grab movement were those with CPM affiliations. According to the organizational report of the State Krishak Sabha, the number of primary members of the

Sabha had gone up by 6 lakhs. The percentage of poor peasants and agricultural labour among the members of the Krishak Sabha had also increased.

Secondly, as regards the distribution of surplus land, the United Front ministry adopted the policy of giving land to as many landless and land-poor peasants as possible, even if the quantum of land given to each peasant was small, rather than adopting the policy of distributing land to a relatively small number of peasants with a view to making their holdings economic. Policy-wise, the CPM was probably motivated by the desire to give security to the largest possible number of landless peasants. It amounted to the policy of economism that trade unions pursue in relation to their target group, the industrial workers. Consolidation of CPM influence was accomplished by satisfying the land hunger of the rural poor.

Thirdly, the CPM led peasant movement seriously disturbed the traditional power balance in the countryside. Exposure and humiliation of the jotedars by the peasants disturbed the means by which power was exercised by the Congress and its splinter group, the Bangla Congress. This had repercussions on the relations between the CPM and the Bangla Congress, within the United Front ministry.

Fourthly, the other left parties, including the CPI were suspicious of the CPM's aggressive policy of expansionism. They were suspicious of CPM's rationalization that as CPM was in the forefront of people's struggles, it was only natural that more people were coming to its fold and its strength was

growing. In this process of expansionism, the CPM was opposed by the other left parties. Since all the left parties in the state have their mass bases in predominately urban areas, the competition for expanding into rural areas was very intense. The conflict was severe between the two main factions of the undivided Communist Party, the CPI and CPM.

According to Ranajit Ray,

The impression in authoritative circles, who are by no means unhappy over the inter-party feuds in the U.P., is that basically it is the conflict between the two communist parties, that is at the root of much of the troubles in West Bengal Government and that the Bangla Congress which is closest to the CPI and the smaller parties are playing second fiddle to one side on the other in a political game. (25)

The first serious clash was reported in June between activists of the CPM and RSP at Alipurduar in North Bengal, in which 3 Marxists were killed. This was followed by a clash between CPM and SSP workers at Berubari^{aw} also in North Bengal, the rivalry in this case seemed to be over a trade union. Also in June, the CPI State Council in a political resolution accused the CPM of using governmental machinery to further its own organizational ends.

There were more clashes in July. The most violent incident was reported in a village in Burdwan district where clashes occurred between Congress supported jotedars and supporters of the CPM. Repercussions of rural conflict found

an echo in urban areas.

Poor peasant's struggle to retain harvest, created a situation, during the harvesting period (September-October), when the tensions among the constituents of the United Front rose to a fever pitch.

A second worse wave of peasant struggles with the slogan "to protect at any cost the crop produced by us" was launched. The United Front Ministry adopted the following guidelines for harvesting:

Peasants were to harvest the crops produced by them on vested or benami lands; the Government was to help them and take suitable measures against jotedaras who would dare to attack peasants. (26)

The 1969 Amendment provided that if a bargadar's harvest was taken away forcibly by the landlord, the bargadar should be entitled to recover from the land the share of the produce due to him at its money value.

The food procurement policy introduced by Konar, leaned towards the rural poor. A graded system of levy was announced: but those who owned land upto 7 acres were exempted from it. Food committees were set up in the districts and were controlled by the Kisan Sabha.

To "protect the toiling peasants harvest" paid dividends for the CPM - its image was further radicalized with the peasantry. But, its clashes with its partners in the United Front increased in numbers. The Bangla Congress, which is

26 KONAR (Barekrishna), Agrarian Problems in India, Calcutta, National Book Agency, 1971, p. 137.

known as 'Jotedar Party' in West Bengal took strong exception to the peasants movement to protect their harvest. Early in October, the Bangla Congress adopted a political resolution which blamed the CPM as the sole cause of lawlessness and unrest in the state. The resolution admitted that interparty struggles, gheraos, forcible occupation of land, a general deterioration of law and order situation, and other unsavoury developments had 'combined to create a deep sense of insecurity among the people. The Bangla Congress resolution threatened to initiate a Gandhian movement to resist this 'intolerable situation'.

The role played by other left parties, including the CPI, is interesting. They did not consider violence in peasant movement as unusual; what they resisted was the fact that the CPM seemed to make the most gains from a favourable situation. Though they considered the land recovery movement as the biggest achievement of the second U.F., they joined together to isolate the CPM, the architect of the movement. Their grievance against the CPM was that the CPM was using the police to settle its own supporters on occupied land, that it had allowed estates below the ceiling to be grabbed because their owners were supporters of other parties, that it had set the police against other parties, when their supporters had occupied 'benami land'. The last months of the United Front Government was marked by the failure on the part of the CPM to allay the suspicions of its left partners and of the failure of the left parties to forge an unity against those who

represented the interests they were ideologically committed to oppose. In the prevailing circumstances, Ajoy Mukherjee, the Bangla Chief Minister did not desist from describing his own Government as 'uncivilised'. The Bangla Congress's mass hunger strike for four days from December 1, 1969, was motivated to discredit the CPM, as a party of gangster elements.

3. Contradictions in Relations Between the Centre and State

In the discussion of centre-state contradiction in 1969, three factors should be kept in mind. Firstly, the second United Front ministry was in a more belligerent mood when ^{it} they assumed office in February 1969, due to resentment for the dismissal of the first UF ministry.

Secondly, the CPM, which had consistently opposed the Congress Party in the series of elections held in West Bengal after 1947, was in a much stronger position in the state Government, with the largest number of elected representatives in the Assembly.

Thirdly, the Congress monolith had split in November 1969 and the Congress led by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi, lost its clear majority in the Lok Sabha. The Central Government was clearly not in a position to intervene in the affairs of the state as in 1967.

The issue that came up during the course of the UF's tenure in office were the following:

Law and Order related to Centre's right to intervene to protect Central property.

Confrontation between the Centre and state assumed greater intensity due to the occurrence of two incidents i.e. Central Reserve Police firing in Durgapur Steel Plant and Cassipore firing. Out of this resulted the resistance to a proposed central probe into the above mentioned incidents in the form of a 'Bengal Bandh'.

On March 24, 1969, the CRP fired at a mob in the administrative building of the Durgapur Steel Plant, as a result of which sixty people were injured.

On April 1969, 5 employees of the Gun and Shell Factory in Cossipore were killed in firing by security guards.

The state Government initiated criminal proceedings while the centre proposed a judicial probe by a former judge of the Supreme Court. As a protest against the Centre's 'interference', the Rashtriya Sangram Samiti called a 24 hour bandh on April 10. The State Government lent all its support to the Bandh and this earned the Centre's displeasure.

The two arguments that were in opposition to each other and formed the basic theme of contradiction with reference to law and order are the Centre's assertion that it had the right to deploy the CRP in all parts of India and that no State Government could demand their withdrawal from its territory and the West Bengal's Government's argument that maintenance of law and order was within the constitutionally delimited jurisdiction^{of} the State Government and that "there cannot be two parallel forces in the state".

Economic relations between Centre and State, was another factor

that caused resentment because the latter's source of revenue was comparatively inelastic while its responsibilities were heavy. Limited share of income tax, separation of corporation tax from income tax, meagre share of Central excise duties etc. result in the Centre's perennial dependence on Centre's grants in aid and loans.²⁷

The state dissatisfaction with its share of Central taxes became more vocal when the U.F. Government came into power.

In its memorandum to the 5th Finance Commission in 1969, state governments said that in respect of the per capita share of total Central devolution including Central assistance for the plan and Central Road Fund, the position of West Bengal was third, in 1952-53, ninth in 1962-63, and in 1966-1967, it went down to the tenth position. (28)

The effect of this kind of distribution of federal resources is reflected in the state budget. In respect of per capita revenue expenditure on nation building activities, its position dropped to eleventh in 1966-67.

West Bengal's demand for more Central assistance was on the basis of its peculiar problems, i.e. population explosion, rampant unemployment, rehabilitation of refugees, chronic poverty, housing shortage, etc. Another source of resentment

27 ROY (Hirendranath), Planning for Development and Union State Conflict - A Paper read at Seminar on Union-State Relations in India (May 1969), Simla, p. 35.

28 GHOSH (Shankar), op. cit., p. 35.

in the state was meagre loans from Central Financial institutions. In a background paper prepared for a conference of industrial development, held in Calcutta on December 1966, a few months before the First United Front Government came to power, it was stated that "West Bengal was not getting adequate financial assistance from Central financial agencies".

Centralized effect of planning has also caused a lot of tensions between the Centre and state. The memoranda~~s~~ submitted by the state Government before the 3rd, 4th, 5th Finance Commissions highlighted the unnecessary duplication, overlapping due to the planning effect.

The state Government further showed how the pattern of assistance was utilised by the centre to influence priorities in the state sector and how the centrally imposed system of priorities has no relevance to the diverse conditions existing in the various states. For e.g. West Bengal was asked to undertake measures for the control of filaria in the state but could not get financial assistance for leprosy control. (29)

Role of the Governor became a focus of conflict due to the role of Governor Dharmavira in dismissing the First United Front Ministry. The tactics which the state Government were the following:

- (i) The UF parties demanded that Dharmavira should be removed from office, due to his role in the dismissing of the first United Front Ministry in 1967.
- (ii) Some of the parties refused to be sworn in by Dharmavira.

29 RAY (Amal), Federalism and Planning in India - Their Mutual Impact" in Seminar on Union-State Relations in India, May 1969.

- (iii) It was finally decided that the U.F. ministry should be sworn in by him but they would not attend^d the customary reception given by the Governor.
- (iv) A telegram was sent to the President of India urging him to recall the Governor by 6th of March, so that the session could not be inaugurated by the latter.
- (v) In rejection of the demand by the Centre, the state Cabinet included two paragraphs in the Governor's address, in which the Governor's action in dismissing the first U.F. ministry was criticized.
- (vi) The Governor's omission of the controversial paragraph resulted in the state Cabinet's departing from the customary motion of thanks to the Governor for his address.
- (vii) As a sign of their displeasure, the UF legislators dispersed with the courtesy of standing up when the Governor left the Chamber.
- (viii) The day of the Assembly episode, the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister proceeded to Delhi to press personally the demands of the state upon the Centre.

Deployment of all-India services was another controversial issue that strained relations between Centre and state. This conflict situation had two components. The first issue was related to efficiency of the services. The complaint of the state Government was that good and able officers were retained at the Centre. It felt that the quality of the state Government suffered.

The second issue related to neutrality of the service.

A lurking suspicion remained that the bureaucracy which had been conditioned in the one party dominant system would not implement with the same zeal the programmes of the leftist government in West Bengal. The above mentioned factors combined in the form of strong reluctance of the West Bengal Government to accept the proposals of the Centre to create new All-India services and Engineering services. The state's demand was that either the existing services were to be placed fully under the control of the state Government or they were to be scrapped.

On the whole, the Centre adopted a balanced perspective in relation to the state Government. Some of the demands which it ignored were related to the demand for 2.4 million tonnes of foodgrains, ^{and} demand to drop the judicial probe into the Cossipore incident. The concessions which it made were regarding transfer of Dharmavira and assurance that the Centre Reserve Police will not be deployed without the UF's consent. The Exist of the UF Government took place due to a combination of circumstances. The CPM alleged that Central Government intervention had resulted in the downfall of the second UF Government. But, by the end of 1969, the Central Government was being run, with the support of parties like DMK, so much so, that the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi had to dissolve the Lok Sabha on December 27, paving the way for the next general elections. Ideological contradictions between the Bangla Congress and the CPM and the former's resentment of the latter's highhandedness were some of the factors that led to

the premature collapse of the ministry.

Two issues convinced the Bangla Congress Chief Minister, Ajoy Mukherjee, of the need to withdraw his party's support to the ministry. (i) When Mukherjee was on tour in Malda district of West Bengal, he came to know of the transfer order given to a police officer who had been investigating cases in which CPM supporters had been involved. On his return to Calcutta, he cancelled the transfer order. This gave rise to a constitutional tussle between Basu and Mukherjee, the former denying that the Chief Minister had any supervisory power, the latter asserting the same. This was an unreasonable claim for the CPM Deputy CM to make as that would amount to denying any role to the Chief Minister at all, and dilute the office, of any substantial significance. Most of the constituents of the UF supported the Bangla Congress as they had suffered from CPM's highhandedness. The Congress split and its new image of a progressive party made it possible for the Bangla Congress to consider an alliance with the Congress. The CPM was isolated:

(ii) The last straw for the Bangla Congress was the physical manhandling of Mr. Ajoy Mukherjee in the Assembly by CPM supporters. On 8th March, the Bangla Congress directed the Chief Minister to quit by 16th March, 1970. It gave the impression that it was not averse to forming a coalition Ministry with the CPI Forward Bloc, SUC. The latter was not convinced that it was the opportune moment to form another coalition, excluding the CPM. According to Economic and

Political Weekly,

Three factors of real politik dispelled the enthusiasm of minifront strategists. They were (1) the formidable strength of the CPM in the legislature, which at 83, is exactly equal to the combined strength of the 3 major parties in the opposite camp, i.e. Bangla Congress, CPI and Forward Bloc. (2) the undetermined strength of the Indira Gandhi Congress vis-a-vis the syndicate bloc which could have been relied upon to give a majority to the minifront. (3) the unquestioned capacity of the CPM to create real trouble in the event of its ouster, as demonstrated by the massive trade union rally before the secretariat. It was also clear to the CPM's opponents, in the popular mind, most of the achievements of the U.F. Government are associated with^{the} CPM. The recovery of benami vested land and restraints on police intervention in mass movements rebounded largely to the credit of the CPM - because CPM holds the 3 key portfolios of Labour, Land, Land Revenue and Home. (30)

The other alternative would be for the CPM to form a Ministry but whether he could gain the support of the other parties was extremely doubtful. The Bangla Congress refused to support his claim during the last days of the U.F.'s tenure, the CPM was planning to bring more land to the distributory pool, to lower the land ceiling to 25 acres per family, exemptions to fisheries and orchards were to be done away with.³¹ These land reform proposals and the protection of peasants harvest campaign were directly related to the Bangla Congress's propaganda offensive against the CPM and the withdrawal of the support from the ministry.

30 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. V, nos. 3, 4, 5, January 1970, p. 95.

31 SENGUPTA (Bhabani), op. cit., p. 258.

The left parties were afraid that if the CPM was allowed another tenure in government, it would advance more rapidly, thus threatening their political survival. According to Bhabani Sengupta,

For the leaders of these parties, politics is a way of making a living, their daily bread and butter. In order to retain their identity and their means of living they have to do everything to keep alive their respective parties. (32)

The proliferation of so many parties adhering to the leftist ideology, fragmentation of the main Communist Party and the intense struggle to retain their respective identities created disunity in the ranks of the left parties. Though the underlying conflicts between the vanguards of the two rival camps, Bangla Congress and CPM, were rooted in their ideological differences, the line-up of parties on each side did not represent alignments that logically followed from their differences. According to Economic and Political Weekly,

The SUC which is more 'Marxist' than the CPM is the closest ally of the Bangla Congress, in its confrontation with the CPM and the LSS, a small local party of Purulia, though more Gandhian than Bangla Congress, appears to be a close ally of the CPM.

The superimposition of non-ideological but vital consideration of party interests on basic conflicts of ideology is best reflected in the behaviour of the CPI. This party runs a full-fledged editorial, carries crude attacks against the CPM but at the same time boldly dissociates itself

from direct attacks on gheraos or a recovery of vested lands by extra legal methods. (33)

The Governor of West Bengal recommended the imposition of President's Rule, as no alternative arrangement was agreed upon by the political parties. President's Rule was imposed on 19th March 1970, but the Assembly was not dissolved for a few weeks.

Chapter IV

RETREAT AND REBIRTH OF THE C.P.M. 1970-1977

This chapter covers a seven year period (between 1970 and 1977) when the CPM and its satellite left parties were on the defensive, due to an organized Congress counter-offensive. This period culminates in the emergence of the CPM as a major political force, in the 1977 Assembly elections, ^{when} it won a majority of 178 seats in a House of 294. The foci of study in this chapter will be:-

Firstly, President's rule and Assembly elections of 1971, 1972; secondly Congress ascendancy between 1970 and 1977; thirdly, 1977 assembly elections and resurgence of the CPM.

Section A : PRESIDENT'S RULE AND ELECTIONS OF 1971, 1972

This section covers a two-year period, from April 1970 to March 1972. Its significance lay in the fact that it provided the foundation for the seven year period of Congress ascendancy from 1970-77.

1. President's rule

The two prominent features of President's rule were Congress counter-offensive against the CPM, CPI (M) and fragmentation of left parties. The Congress party's counter-offensive against the CPM and other left parties did not begin before March 1970 because the Congress Party was untouched by political violence during the tenure of the two united front coalitions. It was after the Sain murders, on 17th March 1970, that the

Congress party launched a counter-offensive with the help of the police and the general administration. Organised propaganda by mass media regarding deteriorating conditions of law and order made it possible for the induction into the state of additional army units, Central Reserve Police, to eliminate CPM sympathisers and cadres, 'Uttar Pradesh's murder figures in 1969 were 3147, while West Bengal's totalled 2417 in 1969-1972.'¹ The period covered in this context, is longer than in UP but considering the disparity in sizes between the two states, the figure is considerable for Bengal.

'Congress cadres also infiltrated into extremist groups, e.g. the Naxalites and utilised the latter for elimination of the CPM'.² Naxalites who expressed disinclination in joining hands with the Congress were eliminated, along with CPM cadres.³ The ground was being prepared for a political comeback for the Congress party in the 1971 polls. Fragmentation of left parties was complete during the period of President's Rule. Governmental power could not keep the left parties together, lack of power saw them falling further apart.

According to Shankar Ghosh,

The 14 parties that had combined in a single alliance to trounce the Congress in the mid-term poll in 1969 split into 3 district groups. Three

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- 1 ANANDABAZAR PATRIKA, Calcutta, 27 August 1972.
 - 2 BASU (Sajal), West Bengal - The Violent Years, Calcutta, Prachi Publication, 1974, p. 79.
 - 3 CPM PAMPHLET, Ruin of Parliamentary Democracy in Bengal, National Book Agency, June 1972.

of the parties split openly. The pro-CPM expelled leader of the Bangla Congress, Sukumar Roy formed a party, of his own with his supporters in the parent party. Roy's party known as the Biplabi Bangla Congress lined up with the CPM. The other two parties were the Revolutionary Communist Party of India and the Bolshevik Party.

The CPM led a 6 party front in which the other constituents were the Workers' party, Forward Bloc (Marxist), Biplabi Bangla Congress, RCPI (Suchin Kumar group) and Bolshevik Party (Nepal Bhattacharya group). Besides a section of the SSP favoured an alliance with the CPM.

The second group was led by the CPI and the 8 constituents were the Forward Bloc, SSP, SUC, PSP, Gorkha League, RCPI (Anandi Das Group), and Bolshevik Party (Barada Mukutmani group).

The Bangla Congress was outside the above mentioned combinations but was close to the CPI led 8 Party Front. (4)

Thus, the CPM was isolated, its allies in the 6 party front were either minor parties or parties which were actually break away groups, e.g., the RSP, RCPI, Bolshevik Party, Against the CPM were ranged, political parties like the two Congresses, the Bangla Congress, CPI, etc. The failure of the CPM to forge a unity of the left parties, would make it an easy target of attacks by the Congress party.

2. The 1971 Assembly Polls and Formation of Congress - Bangla Congress Coalition Ministry

Mrs Gandhi dissolved the Lok Sabha in January 1970 and called for parliamentary elections in March but postponed elections in March on the ground of lawlessness. Finally, this

4 GHOSH (Shankar), The Disinherited State : A Study of West Bengal, 1967-70, Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1971, pp. 287-8.

an argument lost its rationale as parliamentary elections could not be held when assembly elections were being withheld. Besides, the Congress felt that in the 15 months of President's rule, they had managed to blunt the opposition of the CPM to a considerable degree.

Five major political combinations contested the 1971 Assembly polls. They were Mrs Gandhi's Congress, the Syndicate Congress party, Bangla Congress and Socialist Party (break-away from SSP) and PSP (dissident party from PSP), the 8 party combine of the CPI, Forward Bloc, SUC, RSP, SSP, PSP, Bolshevik Party, RCPI and the CPM led Front comprised the CPM, Worker's Party, Biplabi Bangla Congress, RSP (dissident), RCPI (dissident) and Bolshevik Party (dissident).

Due to the inability of Congress and CPI to forge a formal pact and breakdown of unity talks between Bangla Congress and Congress party and inability of left parties to unite on a common platform, it became evident that no party would be able to gain a majority in the Assembly. No party in the state possessed the comprehensive support required to win a majority, though CPM was more favourably placed than the others.

The CPM, which was under attack for its aggressive policy of expansionism, had lost its support in Calcutta, which had been one of its major support bases. The urban middle class identified the CPM with the orgy of urban terrorism which had overwhelmed Calcutta from 1969 onwards. On the contrary, the CPM had obtained the support of the poor peasantry and agricultural labourers, by due to the former's role in the recovery

and distribution of benami land in 1967 and 1969. This 'captured the imagination of the rural poor and led to the dismissal of the CPM to lead United Front Government'.⁵

A class base had been drawn in the villages between the 'haves' and 'have nots', the latter embracing the poor peasant, the landless agricultural worker; and many non-agricultural workers in the small towns (the cycle rickshaw drivers) and villages (petty shopkeepers and daily wage earners) appeared to be solidly behind the CPM. The Marxists appeared to have built a disciplined and working organization in most of the villages around the Kisan Sabha units. 'Their election meetings were numerous, and were attended by peasants from every village in the area, indicating a mass base that had penetrated deeply into the countryside...the Marxists seemed to have a clear field in the largest single constituency of the Indian electorate...the rural proletariat.'⁶

Apart from its loss of popularity in Calcutta, the Marxists were not in a dominating position in the industrial districts of West Bengal. The CPM trade unions were competing with other left unions for supremacy.

The non-CPM did not have any formal pact with each other but they arrived at electoral 'understandings' in many

5 MITTAL (Swasti), Peasant Movements in West Bengal, Their Impact on Agrarian Class Relations Since 1967, Unit of Cambridge, Department of Land Economy, Occasional Paper No. 8, 1977, p. 44.

6 SENGUPTA (Bhabani), Communism in Indian Politics, New Delhi, Young Asia Publication, 1978, p. 163.

constituencies, the most notable being Baranagar, where Jyoti Basu and Ajoy Mukherji were locked together in an electoral contest. Apart from electoral understandings between the non-CPM parties, the latter also made political capital of the law and order situation in the state. The 1971 polls were to show that the lack of left unity was to pay dividends to the non-leftist groupings.

Hostility between the two parties had reached a high point; and it is clear that each party sought to undermine the other, particularly in the case of the CPI wanting to chasten the CPM. A central objective of the CPI in the 1971 elections was to deny the CPM votes, essential to winning the number of seats necessary to gain access to the state government once again. (7)

The election results did not come as a surprise. The CPM could not win a majority in the assembly but it emerged as the dominant group in the legislature. For the first time in Bengal, the Congress party's popular vote was lower than the popular vote of the communists, even of the CPM. In the Assembly elections, the CPM polled 31.98% of the valid votes cast, against 18.20 in 1967 and 19.97 in 1969. The ruling Congress party's share of the vote was 28.20% and that of the 'Syndicate' Congress party 5.50%. Bangla Congress polled a mere 5.18% and the CPI 8.13%. In terms of seats, the Marxists got 123 seats, 17 short of an absolute majority in a House of 280. Next came the ruling Congress party, with 103 seats. The CPI won 13;

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WEINER (Myren), OSGOODFIELD (John), eds., Communist Parties of West Bengal, New Delhi, Manohar Book Service, 1974, p. 47-48.

leftist parties like the Forward Bloc and the PSP ^{suffered} were practically a setback, it managed to get only 5 candidates elected to the Assembly.

The CPM fared better than the Congress due to a combination of factors. Firstly, it had successfully consolidated its base among the rural poor during the 1969-70 period; secondly, the CPM was also able to channelise the traditional anti-Congress sentiments of Bengal, especially in the rural areas. Thirdly, it was able to overcome the Congress offensive itself, partly due to the fact that it had not attained full maturity and also due to its superior organization. Unlike other elections, CPM's election activities were mainly concentrated in secret group meetings in the villages rather than any open meetings or rallies.

The CPM was helped by some fortuitous developments

Cracks developed in the anti-CPM camp due to the defeat of the Forward Bloc candidate in the Rajya Sabha - this created bitterness between FB and CPI and Bangla Congress Governor Dhavan's debut as ruler of the state failed to make a favourable impression in the middle class. CPM was able to mount a strong campaign for restoration of elected government. (9)

Lack of left unity harmed the prospects of the CPM to form a government. Factional quarrels between the leftist forces deteriorated into violence and the latter factor played a major role in alienating the middle class in Calcutta, who,

8 BASU (Sajal), op. cit., p. 76.

9 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, Bombay, vol. V, 15 April 1970, p. 629.

by and large, voted against the CPM.

In their efforts to enter each other's domains and inflict damage, they succeeded in siphoning votes away from themselves. These votes were picked up by third parties, usually Mrs Gandhi's Congress.... the CPI lost 17 of the 24 seats in which it had been victorious two years before, while the CPM was defeated in only seven of the thirty four it had won.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the fact that the CPI had suffered more in the process of CPM-CPI hostility, the CPM in 1971 was not strong by itself to return to the Assembly with a majority.

Nevertheless, the CPM without an alliance with its major rival, the CPI, did reasonably well. Except for its defeats in Calcutta (which probably cost it a majority in the Assembly) it maintained its position in Burdwan, Hooghly, Howrah, 24 Parganas and made unexpected gains in Midnapur, Bankura, Birbhum and Nadia.

1971 witnessed the formation of the fourth coalition ministry in Bengal and its collapse within two and half months.

The CPM, being the party with the largest strength in the Assembly, attempted to form a ministry, with the help of the 8 party combination. But the latter were too wary of the CPM's intentions and the CPI unit in Bengal bowed down to the dictates of its central leadership and rejected the CPM's overtures. The CPI, eventually supported a coalition ministry of Congress, Bangla Congress and the Muslim League. The distrust

of the CPM went so deep that the CPI preferred the Congress and even the Muslim League, rather than support the claims of the CPM to form a government. The parting of ways had come for the two parties in the bitter struggle for supremacy, while participating in the United Front Government of 1969.

The coalition government did not last more than two and half months. Rampant factionalism within the ruling Congress party in West Bengal helped it to dig its own grave. Its pre-occupations with infighting within the party, did not permit it to tackle the maladies that beset the state; critical law and order situation, demoralization of the administration, influx of refugees from a strife torn East Pakistan. West Bengal found itself under President's rule for the third time in three years. But this time, the Central Government introduced a novel feature, in appointing Siddhartha Shankar Ray, as Minister for West Bengal. He was given the overall charge of West Bengal. It may be noted that it was for the first time, a minister was being appointed to act as a custodian of a state under President's Rule.

3. President's Rule and 1972 Assembly Elections

President's Rule (April 1971-March 1972) was noted for organized institutional violence that assumed proportions which were strange, even in a state like West Bengal which was accustomed to urban/rural violence from 1969.

Mr Prafulla Roy Chowdhury mentions that "Ray in close co-operation with the Governor, tried to introduce measures, so that the house could be put in order. Lawlessness was put down

with the help of the army, the Central Reserve Police and with
 11
 stricter control over the Police.

What it actually amounted to was 'liberating' areas from extremist influence. To achieve this objective, Ray mobilized all the resources at hand'. For the first time since 1967, anti-social elements attained political eminence hitherto unknown.

The communication media indulged in virulent propaganda against the urban violence of the leftists. All news, which was harmful to establishment interests were blotted out. On the eve of the 1972 elections and after the elections, all complaints and appeals for safety or open proofs of rigging, were gone unrecorded or unredressed.

Agitation or organising of anti-government demonstrations were put to rest by sheer use of local mastans.

Forceful capture of trade unions and frontal organizations, imprisonment and liquidation of CPM and other left party union leaders was also common.

Politics of area occupation reached maturity; the policy being to concentrate on CPM areas and weed out its cadres and sympathisers and lastly, the elimination of last vestiges of Naxalite influence.

The counter-terrorism of the Congress started from 1971 onwards, in Cossipore, where mass scale witch hunts against Naxalites, led to 100 casualties in the area, the Barasat killings or Amdanga affair where dead bodies of young boys were found, and the

11 ROYCHOWDHURY (Prafulla), West Bengal - A Decade, (1965-1975), Calcutta; Boipatra Publishers, 1977, p. 233.

murder of Naxalites in the prisons. According to CPM forces, Congress (R) murdered 175 CPM cadres, and caused serious violence to 360 during 1971-72. The phase reached its climax on 6th March 1972, when an attack on a Congress procession at Dum Dum, unleashed a deluge of counter attack by Congress men against the CPM in the whole Calcutta and suburb areas where the CPM still could hold some organisational strength. From Calcutta to Krishnanagar in the north to Diamond Harbour in the south, towards the industrial belt of Howrah, in Hooghly and Burdwan, mass scale migration of CPM cadres from their areas to the safe places took place. (12)

Assembly elections were scheduled for March 1972. One of the notable factors that decided the fate of the CPM was the alliance between the Congress (the Bangla Congress had merged with it in 1972) and the CPI ^{In 1971 the CPI} had contested the elections, ^{ANN} against the CPM as much as the Congress, but 1972 was different in the fact that it concluded a formal alliance with the Congress party. Political compulsions over gaining a leadership position over the communist movement proved stronger than ideological ties. Besides, CPI's insistence that Mrs Gandhi New Congress did not retain its bourgeois class character, created a deep gulf between the two communist parties. The Congress, CPI and the PSP formed the Progressive Democratic Alliance, against which was ranged the CPM led Left Front.

The 1972 Assembly elections went down in Indian parliamentary history as the most violent election after 1947. Intimidation and rigging by Congress hired mastans made a mockery of the democratic process.

On the polling day, in Dum Dum constituency, CPM could only man 2 booths. CPM voters refrained from attending the booths due to unrestrained terrorism. In Jyoti Basu's constituency, no poster or booth office in his favour was found...in the industrial belt of North 24 Parganas and Howrah, covering 16 majorities, in majority of Calcutta and Burdwan district constituencies, massive rigging occurred. In rural constituencies where confrontation with Congress did not take place, the Congress storm troopers used other soft rigging methods, such as stamping the absentee voters' ballots and forcing the CPM voters to go home. Such mild rigging methods were used where CPM had no strong hold, or when the main constituents belonged to other parties. Even on the day of polling large scale armed attack on CPM candidates cadres and booth offices were made in Jadavpur, Tallygunj, Khardah, Dhakuria, Baranagar, Kamarhali and other industrial area constituencies...on the approach of polling day screening of CPM cadres and supporters were completed and they were asked either to leave the area or face attack on their lives. After Congress victory this pattern was followed in peaceful zones too. The CPM cadres left their mohallas to avoid counter-terrorism of Congress. This was not limited to disturbed areas or places where violent conflict between parties occurred. In all districts, Congress action led to mass scale absconding of CPM supporters. (13)

The results of 1972 elections gave the Congress an overwhelming majority with 216 seats in the Assembly, The CPI which had managed a paltry 13 seats in 1971, was the second largest group in the Assembly with 38 seats. The CPM, which had hitherto registered a steady gain in seats, had to be content with only 14 seats. Congress (O) could win only 2 seats. Of the other left parties, BSP was successful with 3 seats and the Worker's Party managed only one.

A scrutiny of election results of 1972 show that in the

Table 19CPM AND CONGRESS VOTES IN SOME SELECTED CONSTITUENCIES

	1967	1969	1971	1972	Total Adverse Movement against CPM in 1972 over 1971
<u>Baranagar</u>					
CPM	31,354	45,261	43,340	30,158	50,040
Congress	27,895	27,669	32,287	69,146	
<u>Dum Dum</u>					
CPM	37,006	45,159	40,736	15,023	85,713
Congress	30,682	30,867	31,423	91,423	
<u>Panihati</u>					
CPM	34,671	53,346	58,545	27,540	81,491
Congress	23,851	22,029	24,479	74,765	
<u>Memari</u>					
CPM	22,217	31,337	39,336	11,229	60,090
Congress	23,010	21,785	27,666	53,119	
<u>Nadanghat</u>					
CPM	21,070	28,304	34,288	2,621	71,118
Congress	26,025	24,328	22,317	61,617	
<u>Kalna</u>					
CPM	22,128	29,384	31,896	8,929	68,373
Congress	20,877	22,184	24,930	62,336	

Source: ECONOMIC & POLITICAL WEEKLY, March 25, 1972.

context of progressive improvement of the CPM's electoral performance after 1967, the sharp decline in 1972 is difficult to understand.

The terms of electoral support CPM's percentage of votes increased steadily from 18.20% in 1967, 19.97% in 1969 to 31.98% in 1971; in 1971 it surpassed the popular vote of the Congress (R) party for the first time. From a tally of 173 seats in 1971, to a decline of 14 seats in 1972 is inconceivable, especially when one considers the fact that the CPM did not hold office in the 1971-72 period, which could have tarnished its political image with the electorate. Moreover, the negative conditions of deteriorating law and order which could have served as propaganda material was no longer relevant as the state was being administered by the Centre during the intervening period of President's rule and the above-mentioned condition pertaining to law and order was in existence even in 1971 (when the CPM of votes had surpassed the Congress).

The United Front Government only ruled for 21 months out of the sixty months of 1967-72 period and so it is clear that for two-thirds of the time the state was under Congress rule of various sorts. Besides, the record of the two Congress ministries, P. C. Ghosh's ministry (1967-68), Ajoy Mukherjee's 3 month ministry following the 1971 elections, showed factional fighting and disintegration, ^{which were} more rapid than that of the United Fronts'.
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In terms of mass base, the CPM was much better organized to mobilise the people. Its base among the rural poor had been consolidated and nurtured particularly from 1959 onwards. The middle class had voted against the CPM in 1971 elections but although that cost the CPM an absolute majority in the House, it was still the single largest party in the House.

The appointment of Siddhartha Shankar Ray as Cabinet Minister for West Bengal during President's rule in the state, was an unprecedented move in itself. This factor could not have been conducive to a free and fair elections.

Some might point to the CPI-Congress (R) alliance as the factor that proved decisive for the CPM's electoral performance in 1972. But, a perusal of CPI's performance in Assembly elections in Bengal show that it was dependent on alliances with other parties. In 1971, when it did not have an electoral alliance with CPM or Congress (R), it lost 17 of the 24 seats it had won in 1969. Its membership of the Progressive Democratic Alliance could not have made much of a qualitative difference to the Congress obtaining an overwhelming majority of 216 seats.

To conclude, CPM's policy of expansionism and swallowing up of bases of other parties, including the CPI, isolated it from the political mainstream of West Bengal. The CPI's total haul of 35 seats in the Assembly were obtained to the loss of the CPM. Here, it must be mentioned, that the CPM's policy of base expansionism was not the most important factor that accounted for the CPM's electoral failure. There was a basic contradiction

between the ideology professed by the ruling elite in the Central Government and the labour militancy and peasants movement that marked the United Front in 1967 and particularly in 1969. Significant deterioration of law and order (due to inter-party rivalries caused by the CPM's aggressive policies vis-a-vis its partners in the United Front) served as a convenient pretext for the Congress party to retaliate against the CPM with the help of the army - police combine. Some modicum of restraint on the part of the CPM and a determined effort to take its United Front partners (at least, the left parties) along with it in the implementation of its radical policies would have decreased its vulnerability to onslaughts from the Establishment from 1972 to 1977.

Section B . CONGRESS ASCENDENCY 1972-1977

The Congress Party, having won majority in West Bengal, formed a Government on its own. The CPI pledged support from outside but reserved for itself the right to criticize and mobilize popular support on its behalf.

1. The Role of the Congress Party in Government

The Congress party had returned to power but in the period between 1972 and 1977, it did not make any efforts to acquire legitimacy for itself. Power without legitimacy is a dangerous condition, especially in a state where the people had been made conscious of exploitation and where traditions of violence have gone deep into the socio-political fabric. The process of disintegration of Siddhartha Shankar Ray's ministry started due to several reasons.

Firstly, thousands of opportunistic elements had flocked to the Congress party, and they had been given the responsibility of weeding out leftist elements, particularly the CPM and CPI (ML) activists. When political power was denied to them they became restive. According to Prafulla Roy Chowdhury,

By and large they were not permitted to determine the course of events; in the party organisation they were also not given the responsibility. The Pradesh Congress and District Congress organizations were placed in better status and positions than the party cadres. (15)

Secondly, the struggle for power in the upper echelons of the Congress party (West Bengal Unit) continued. The factional quarrels that could not be resolved were handled by their faithful followers in their customary way, i.e., by violence. The policy of annihilation which had been adopted against the communists, boomeranged on themselves. Open killings and factional clashes in the party became common.

Thirdly, the CPM had used administrative power for increasing its support bases, ^{but} the Chief Minister of West Bengal utilized political power for personal benefit only. The methods he employed i.e. encouraging factionalism in order to diffuse opposition and sycophancy on the Prime Minister, were unhealthy in a volatile state like West Bengal.

Fourthly, the Congress party did not make use of the opportunity afforded to itself to rehabilitate its image vis-a-vis the public. Opposition to it was low key, but it could not

generate sufficient political will to give a facelift to the stagnant economy of the state. According to Barun Sengupta:

The annual income of the Bengalis increased by only 70 paise in the first 2 years of the Congress tenure; during P. C. Sen's stewardship, it had been Rs.3.14, while even in the much aligned United Front period, it had been Rs.2.20. (16)

The number of unemployed had risen to the staggering number of 40 lakhs, yet no substantial efforts were made to open up new avenues of employment to absorb the idle labour force. No efforts were made to diversify the narrow industrial structure of West Bengal. Lack of demand caused the state to turn into a nursery of sick industrial units after 1965.

In the engineering industry alone, unemployment was approaching 9000 in 1972.¹⁷

According to Anil Rai, since 1974, there has been an increase in the number of closures, lock-outs, retrenchments and lay-offs affecting 700,000 jute workers. In 1976, out of 62 mills in the state, 10 had been closed, even though there had been an upswing in domestic demand and experts had also risen from 60,000 tonnes to 90,000 tonnes per month. Jute mill owners unilaterally cancelled bipartite wage settlements, arbitrarily reduced wages of the workers and also heavily increased the work-load. (18)

The State Government did not take up the demands of the workers and even abrogated their trade union rights.

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- 16 SENGUPTA (Barun), Saiya and Kainiti, Calcutta, Ahand Publishers, 1977.
- 17 SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Trivandrum, vol. 6, no. 6/7, January-February 1978, p. 110.
- 18 RAI (Anil), "Trends in the Jute Industry", Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 6/7, January-February 1978, p. 97.

Land reforms under the Congress Government also suffered reverses. A brutal terror was let loose on the peasant movement, land occupied by the peasants during the United Front rule was taken forcibly back in many cases, either to be given back by the Jotedars or to be 'distributed' to followers of Congress. A new Act was enacted (1972) which made certain Amendments on the West Bengal Land Reform Act, 1955; individual ceilings were replaced by family ceilings but sons of landowners were designated as separate families. Transfers of land to other sources before 1969 were outside the purview of the law. Fisheries, orchards, religious or charitable lands were exempted as before. These loopholes were taken advantage of as before by rural vested interests. 'Severe warnings were also given that extra legal measures should not be used to implement land reform laws and 'no peasant movement would be tolerated under Congress rule'.

According to the CPM weekly organ, People's Democracy

The Congress Government's decision to stop all settlement operations that have been going up on so long and state start de novo settlement operations in only 5 districts was characterized as sabotage of even the existing land reform legislation. The Congress government has also reversed the United Front Government's plan to introduce graded revenue exempting up to 3 acres, and has increased land revenue by 3 times in irrigated areas and two times in other areas for all peasants owning above 3 acres. (20)

Fifthly, another factor that marked the Siddhartha Ray

19 GHOSH (Ratan) NAGARAJ, "Land Reforms in West Bengal", Social Scientist, vol. 6, no. 6/7, January/February 1978, pp. 57-58.

20 PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY, New Delhi, January 28, 1973.

ministry was the lack of delegation of responsibility to the lower echelons. The practice of bugging ministerial phones, did not make for co-operation and trust.

Lastly, by June 1974, the Progressive Democratic Alliance between the CPI and the Congress in Bengal ceased to exist. In 1972, the Congress needed the CPI to project its 'progressive' image among the people. The CPI, too, had its own compulsions to seek the Congress as an ally, chief of them being the fear of the CPM. But, by 1974, the Congress felt sufficiently strong by itself to be able to do without the CPI's support. The CPI had also become unacceptable to some powerful sections of the West Bengal Congress. Neither the CPI nor the Congress tried to involve the people in the tasks of reconstruction of the state's economy. The CPI announced that it would function as an opposition party in the Assembly but would not join the CPM in an anti-government hysteria.

2. CPM's Political Role Between 1972 and 1977

The CPM between 1972 and 1977 played a dual role - i.e. firstly, mobilization of support of left and democratic elements; secondly, mobilization of the peasantry and industrial workers continued under unfavourable political conditions.

Mobilization of support of left and democratic elements was necessary, if the CPM was to fight the Congress politically, especially in the atmosphere of political violence (against its cadres), in which it had to function after 1970.

The policy of aggressive expansionism and militancy which it pursued in 1969 isolated it from the political parties which

were in opposition to the Congress party. The CPM realized a free and democratic atmosphere was the essential requisite, if the party was to survive and grow. For reasons of survival the need was to bring left and democratic forces on a common platform, so that the Congress party could be revised forcefully. In this manner, it could retain the leadership of the left and democratic parties and also extend its mass base. This was a far cry from 1969, when in the opinion of the Marxists, a polarisation had developed within the United Front between the Marxists on the one hand, and the left parties, including the CPI, on the other.

As the class struggles become sharper and sharper, the anti-communist forces of all shades will try to attack the CPM more and more. We note with grave concern that certain forces inside the United Front, such as the revisionists, SUC and the like... have begun campaigning against the CPM. (21)

The CPM took the initiative to bring together several parties in 1973.

It opened talks with the Socialist Party and paved the way for a common programme for agitation and implementation. The joint meeting of the CPM, CPI, six other leftist parties in 1974 and the formulation of a charter of minimum demands and plans for a jointly sponsored protest on May 3, was a landmark. The left parties organised a hartal on May 15, in support of the railway strike. Spasmodic mass actions continued throughout 1975 in support of fundamental right and increase of prices of essential commodities. (22)

Compulsions of an organizational nature, brought the CPM

21 SENGUPTA (Shabani), op. cit., p. 243.

22 CPM POLITICAL RESOLUTION, adopted at 10th Congress of CPM, Jullundur, May 1978, p. 37.

and leftist parties together after the Congress offensive against the CPM, much of the organizational life of the CPM went 'underground'. Many of the district committees had to be reorganized since the proclamation of the emergency, in the greater Calcutta area.

According to Mr Jyoti Basu:

Twenty four out of twenty-six local were dismantled a large number of cadres dismissed. Many trade union offices had been attacked and workers prevented from associating with CIU and UTUC. (23)

Organisational weakness made the CPM unable to organize statewide demonstrations and protest movements without the help of other left and democratic parties. At one stage, the CPM even requested Jayaprakash Narayan to organise a movement that could bring left and democratic parties on a common platform to fight authoritarianism.

Mobilization of peasantry and industrial workers continued under imposed semi-legal conditions. With the ousting of the United Front Government from power in March 1970, a reign of terror was let loose by the Congress regime on the CPM's expanded rural bases and support bases among the industrial workers. The Kishan Sabha and the CIU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions) worked to establish branches in all the districts and villages and industrial areas, keeping in touch with the masses.

According to People's Democracy, weekly organ of the CPI:

23 BASU (Jyoti), "Six Months of Congress Rule in West Bengal", CPM PAMPHLET, Calcutta, National Book Agency, 30th September 1972.

The Kisan Sabha took up the following tasks:
 (i) raise the political level of the masses and unite them in struggle for democracy. (ii) organise more firmly the agricultural labourers and poor peasants and at the same time build broad-based peasant unity. (iii) establish closer links with the working class and the left democratic movement. (iv) expose Government demagogy and move the masses in actions on burning issues - however partial they may be. The central slogan was to save the movement from being crushed, strengthen the organised movement and defend the gains of the United Front period. (24)

Rural unity and expansion of mass bases were consolidated on the basis of immediate issues confronting the rural masses. Krishak Sabha's Provincial Conferences were held in which publicity was given to the demands and challenges that the party was placing before the ruling Congress. The West Bengal Krishak Sabha Conferences were held in November 1972, March 1973, February 1974^{and} June 1975. The agenda and review of 'actions' undertaken under the auspices of the Kisan Sabha between one conference and the next were decided in district Krishak Conferences. Two regional conventions of agricultural workers were also held under the auspices of the All-India Kisan Sabha in November 1974. These conferences helped to draw attention to the CPM's strategy which was to concentrate on movements for realisation of

demands like land higher wages, higher shares in crop-sharing, adequate prices for crops, low food prices for consumers etc. which in turn would provide the necessary condition for realisation of the basic demand, agrarian revolution, i.e., seizure of all lands of landlords. (25)

24 PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY, March 17, 1974.

25 Ibid., March 10, 1974.

Some measure of the success of the Kisan Sabha's activities can be gauged from the fact that the membership of the organization increased from 2.8 lakhs in 1972 to 4.3 lakhs in 1973.²⁶

The food struggle which was linked with the CPM's propagation of an alternative procurement policy served as a rallying force for the rural and urban masses. It started on September 23, 1973, in Calcutta with a mile long procession organised by 5 left parties and several massive rallies in districts like Purulia, Bankura, Malda, etc., which were worst affected by food shortages. This drive reached its climax in October 1974 when there were demonstrations, Gheraos of Government offices at all levels, in blocks, and thanas to demand relief and ration, and massive hunger demonstration in Calcutta on October 27, 1974. 50,000 campaign pamphlets were sold.

The CPM's alternative procurement policy, according to People's Democracy, CPM weekly:

All the surpluses of big landowners owning more than ten acres irrigated and 15 acres of unirrigated land should be compulsorily procured at last year's price. This will ensure that ration price does not increase above Rs.1 per kg., to extend rationing area and even increase rations to 450 gms. per adult per day. (27)

The Kisan Sabha (Bengal unit) also took up the issue of the sharecroppers' share of the harvest. They insisted on the sharecroppers taking harvest on the basis of 75: 25 ratio.

26 Ibid., p. 9.

27 Ibid., October 28, 1973.

According to People's Democracy,

Peasants in wide areas of Sundarbans have taken 75% of their harvest. In 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly districts, where the wage movement could be organized, it directly helped to mobilize the sharecroppers. Some success was also possible in Murshidabad, Nadia and Coochbehar. (28)

The peasant harvest struggle continued till 1977 and according to People's Democracy, Jotedars' attacks upon sharecroppers have led to 30²⁹ deaths and the number of injured persons has gone up to 300.

The Kisan Sabha also organized the poor peasants in recovering benami land which had been snatched away after the fall of the second United Front Government. By March 1974, the CPM claimed that the Kisan movement had succeeded in reoccupying about 900³⁰ acres of benami land which had been snatched away from them.

Another factor that was emphasized was the support given to the struggle of agricultural workers for higher wages of Rs.8 per day. In addition to issuing of posters, leaflets, holding of village rallies, mass deputations and demonstrations, taking out of Jathas and ultimately strike actions in some villages were the methods employed. The rate of Rs.8 could be won in most areas of struggle in Howrah district, success was also had³¹ in Hooghly. Also deputations to the Block Development Officers,

28 Ibid., June 8, 1975.

29 Ibid., January 9, 1977.

30 Ibid., March 17, 1974.

31 Ibid., June 8, 1975.

to whom charters of demands with mass signatures were submitted³² were reported from Hooghly, Birbhum and Midnapore districts.

By 1975, CPM was being hampered in its activities by the absence of CPM cadres who were being held under Preventive Detention, MISA, etc. So from 1975, the emphasis has been extended to civil liberties. After the declaration of emergency, conventions and public meetings were prohibited by police but scores of hall meetings were held in all parts of the state, on the issue of amendment to the constitution.

According to People's Democracy,

The constraints of the prevailing situation forced the CPM to conduct its propaganda mainly through gate meetings, hall meetings, deputations to Government, stoppage of work for a certain line, sit-ins, etc...stress was on the sale of party literature, Marxist Leninist classics, membership enrolment campaigns for the party and mass organisation, collection of Party funds, classes for new cadres. (33)

The claims of the CPM, notwithstanding it must be emphasized that strikes in villages and resistance to jotedars could be possible in some pockets of the state. But, the important thing is that Kisan Sabha and CPM cadres were successful in maintaining and extending their contacts with the rural masses.

The CPM did not neglect the industrial workers either. It took up the issues of bonus, retrenchment, closures, lock-outs and agitated for better living conditions for the workers, and took steps against increased work-load. Before the declaration of

32 Ibid., December 28, 1975.

33 Ibid., September 1976.

emergency in mid-1975, the CPM in Bengal led a number of bonus struggles. ^(workers) Phillips, Union Carbide, Indian Oxygen, Hindustan Gas ^{and} realised 20% bonus. In some jute mills in 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly, ³⁴ the workers realized bonus from 10 to 20%.

Section C THE 1977 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS : RESURGENCE OF THE CPM

The 1977 state Assembly elections is of significance, in the context of the CPM's electoral comeback after a period of 5 years. Some measure of the imminent success of the left parties could be foreseen by the prestigious victories of the CPM in the parliamentary elections in March 1977. The CPM was the party which sent the largest number of representatives to the Lok Sabha; it contested 20 seats and was successful in obtaining 17. The Janata Party was the second most successful party with 15 representatives in the Lok Sabha. The Congress contested 34 seats and was able to return only 3 candidates to the Lok Sabha. The most dismal fate was that of the CPI, which was not able to get even one candidate to the Lok Sabha. In the Lok Sabha elections, the CPM found ample propaganda material in loss of democratic liberties, detaining political prisoners, curbs on the press, anti-democratic amendments to the constitution, the impounding of bonus, attacks against poor peasants and agricultural labourers, etc.

Some factors were crucial in determining the outcome of the electoral battle.

The Congress was torn apart by factional fighting. In the words of Kalyan Chaudhari,

Factional fights took place in almost all the 34 of the 42 seats which the Congress Party contested. Even Congress ministers got candidates to masquerade as 'independents' opposing the official candidate. (35)

Another factor that was important in ensuring the victory of the CPM was its electoral alliance with the Janata-CFD combine.

According to Ajit Ray,

In the recent polls, the CPM widely traded its votes in 13 constituencies with the Janata Party - CFD combine for the cover of an alliance with a view to defeat the terror and rigging of elections by the Congress toughs in collision with the state apparatus. The CPM tactics have clearly paid the party handsome dividends. (36)

A very high degree of political consciousness among the mass of voters was also in evidence, even though, except for three vast rallies on the Calcutta maidan, very few mass meetings could be held in individual constituencies. The officials of Central Election Commission were also vigilant.

According to Ajit Ray,

This public and official cognizance of the rigging activities providing a refreshing contrast to the silence after 1972. This changed response has been largely due to the fact that the Establishment was vertically split, whereas the 1972 elections represented a confrontation between Establishment and the CPM. (37)

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- 35 CHAUDHARI (Kalyan), "Even Rigging Fails", Economic and Political Weekly, vol. XII, no. 14, April 2, 1977, p. 555.
- 36 RAY (Ajit), "Gains for the Left", Economic and Political Weekly, vol. XII, no. 14, April 2, 1977, p. 564.
- 37 Ibid., p. 564.

1. Assembly Elections of 1977

The CPM, with its confidence restored, went to the Assembly polls in June 1977 as the leader of a left front which included the CPM, Forward Bloc (Marxist), Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Communist Party of India, Biplabi Bangla Congress, Revolutionary Socialist Party, independents supported by the left front.

Three Political Configurations contested the 1977 Assembly elections - Janta-CFD, Congress; CPM led Left Front, CPI and SUC. The pre-poll (Assembly) political situation witnessed the scuttling of the Janata, CFD-Left Front alliance and also the Congress-CPI alliance. The break between the Janata Party and the Left Front was inevitable, since their coming together in March was for the strictly limited aim of defeating the Congress at the central level. The Janata party was also confident of sweeping the Assembly polls in West Bengal.

Another notable feature of the pre-election scene in West Bengal has been the parting of ways between the Congress and CPI. Even before the Lok Sabha elections, there were powerful elements in the Congress camp, who were opposed to any electoral arrangement within the CPI. Tarun Kanti Ghosh had openly voiced his resentment in his family newspaper, Jugantar. The CPI was also subject to divisive pulls, certain sections were demanding a reversal of the party's pro-Congress slant.

According to Economic and Political Weekly,

It looks as if the CPI took the initiative and there have been reports that a major faction of the West Bengal Unit had been against the party's

alliance with Congress. But, the announcement that there would be no alliance between the two parties was first made by the West Bengal Congress President. (38)

Congress party's organizational machinery had become stagnant due to the in-fighting that virtually divided the party into two groups - the 'pro-changers', and 'no-changers', according to their respective attitudes towards the continuance of Siddhartha Shankar Ray as Chief Minister. The balance ultimately tilted in his favour but the rift was never patched up in a substantial sense. Subrata Mukherjee, who belonged to the rival group, accused the Chief Minister in abetting the rigging of Lok Sabha elections for four seats.³⁹ The Congress was in no position to take advantage of the disintegration of the Janata-Left Front alliance.

Apart from political bankruptcy, if the Ray ministry was to be judged in terms of economic indicators, the record was not inspiring. Stagnation of industrial growth and acute power shortage was the order of the day.

According to Political and Economic Weekly,

By the second half of 1976, Ray had already come under pressure of the conspiracy for his ouster mounted by Sanjay Gandhi and his henchmen. Much of his time and energy was taken up by devising counter-plots to foil the plots against him. Indeed, there was hardly any coordination between the different ministries. (40)

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- 38 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. XII, no.21, May 21, 1977, p. 816.
- 39 CHAUDHARI (Kalyan), "Even Rigging Fails", Economic and Political Weekly, vol. XII, no. 14, April 2, 1977, p. 565.
- 40 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. XII, no. 20, May 14, 1977, p. 787.

The 1977 Assembly election results gave the CPM an absolute majority, with 178 seats in a House of 294. It was for the first time that the CPM was in a position to form a government by itself. The Left Front obtained a total of 231 seats in a House of 294. The Janata Party which had hoped to win majority in the Assembly could manage only a paltry 29 seats. The Congress and the CPI, which had been identified with authoritarianism and emergency excesses, suffered an ignominious defeat. Between them, they managed only 22 seats in a House of 294.⁴¹

Some of the interesting aspects of the poll outcome can be enumerated as follows:

Firstly, while the Left Front had secured a majority of 181 over the combined strength of the Janata Party and the Congress, the former's lead in terms of popular votes was about 3% only. The Left Front secured 45% of the valid votes as against 22.5% of the Congress 20.6% of Janata Party.

Secondly, a small but compact party, the SUC committed to a variety of classical Marxism and ostracised by Left Parties, was able to bag 4 seats, the CPI, with its national status and international recognition, scrapped through in just two constituencies.

Thirdly, all leaders of Congress strong men brigades who claimed the 'credit' for liberating West Bengal from the

CPM's grip had been rejected by the voters.

The victory of the Left Front in the Assembly elections can be attributed to a combination of factors.

The popularity of the Congress Party had waned. The West Bengal electorate, especially, the middle class had tired of the outbreak of senseless violence in the state after 1969. They saw in the Congress party, a bulwark against terrorism and lawlessness. They had been exhausted by the sloganist policies of the United Front Governments. They also thought that the Chief Minister, Mr Siddhartha Shankar Ray had the confidence of the Prime Minister and so the centre would consider the state's economic problems with greater sympathy. Yet, West Bengal remained in the same groove, there was no progress in industry and agriculture during the tenure of the Congress. Even though funds were spent lavishly in certain sectors, no decisive improvement was made in production. The wave of repression let loose by the Congress and the loss of democratic liberties served to alienate the people from the Congress.

The Congress party was torn apart by factionalism; ministers did not hesitate to denounce each other in public. The last quarter of 1976, saw a split at the Congressional leadership level between Tarun Kanti Ghosh and Mr Siddhartha Shankar Ray. This struggle for power had its source in the powerful Sanjay Gandhi 'caucus' in Delhi. Pressure was being generated to remove Mr Ray to make way for Mr Tarun Kanti Ghosh. The party was so

divided by interparty struggles that it could not mobilize all its resources to face the determined opposition of the left front.

Table 20

1977 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

Parties	Number of contesting candidates	No. of vic-torious candidates	Second position	Forfeiting of deposits
CPM	224	177	26	11
Forward Bloc	36	25	6	3
RSP	23	20	2	1
RCPI	3	3	-	-
Forward Bloc. (M)	3	3	-	-
Biplabi Bangla Congress	3	1	1	-
Independents (supported by Left Front)	1	1	-	-
Janata	293	29	80	118
Congress	293	20	160	67
CPI	63	2	5	50
SUC	26	4	2	17
Muslim League	27	1	-	26
CPI (ML)	3	1	-	1
Independents	567	6	11	506

Source: The 1977 Assembly Elections, SPM Pamphlet, Calcutta, 1977.
The parliamentary polls of March 1977 were a proof

of the gap that separated the Congress from the aspirations of the people. The support of the Congress had been eroded to such an extent, that it could only get 3 candidates out of 34, returned to the Lok Sabha, Deterioration of morale set in

quickly in the party which had already degenerated into self-seeking and indifference to the simmering discontent among the people. 1977 marked the rejuvenation of leftism in Bengal. After 1970, the Establishment organized a systematic campaign to suppress the leftist movement in Bengal. Left parties, for example, the CPM, RSP, RCPI, Forward Bloc were targets of attack. Their cadres were imprisoned or eliminated, trade union offices were closed down, and 'areas of support' cordoned off. Common experiences of victimisation and sufferings brought them together in a common front against the Congress party in June 1977. The left front ended the isolation of the CPM from other leftist forces (with the exception of the CPI).

2. CPM Led Left Front Government - Radicalism Within Democratic Framework

It appears that the CPM has learnt its lessons well. Its period of trial (between 1970 and 1977) has dictated its present policy of taking cautious and wary steps to social change, so that social unrest and turbulence does not become so uncontrollable that they threaten to engulf the system and invite retaliation from the Establishment.

B. T. Ranadive, member of the CPM's politbureau and President of CITU, had categorically declared in 1969: The task of the Marxist dominated U.F. Government of West Bengal is to unleash the discontent of the people rather than giving relief In 1977, the CPM effected a total change in its party 'line'. Mr Ashok Mitra, the articulate Finance Minister of West Bengal, speaking on CPM policy said: "Our main aim is to stabilize

the situation.... there is no revolution through elections. The aim is merely, nothing else, to give some relief to the toiling masses". According to Mr Ashok Mitra:

What we are trying to achieve here is to set an example. Our achievements will get through to the working people in the rest of the country, if not through the press, then by word of mouth that the Government of Bengal is a lobbyist for the toiling masses that it is trying to ease things for them.(43)

Again, according to Mr Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of Bengal, "The aims of the Government are quite unambitious: to provide an honest and clean administration which is more people-oriented."⁴⁴

The CPM's policy is to introduce slow, gradual changes in the fabric of society in Bengal. Ameliorative measures were to go hand in hand with mobilization of the peasantry and urban workers. Controlled peasant militancy is the CPM's policy in the rural areas. Its aim is to give relief to the toiling peasantry and also mobilize them for revolutionary purposes.

Unlike in the late 60's, there has been no seizure of surplus land by the landless nor has the party directed the peasants to take initiative to retrieve the lands taken back under Congress rule.

The Left Front Government has strengthened the position of the sharecropper vis-a-vis the landlord, by initiating legis-

43 SINGH (Ajay), "Communist Party of India (Marxist) - Mellowed Militancy" in India Today, April 1-15, 1978, p. 48.

44 VOHRA (Gautam), "Radical Party reformist Government", in Times of India, Delhi, December 1978, p. 6.

lation amending the West Bengal Land Reform Act. The postulates of the Act are: - (i) a land-owner can evict a bargadar only if he wants to bring such land under 'personal cultivation'. Personal cultivation shall not include cultivation by servants or labourers or wages payable in cash or in kind. (ii) The bargadar has been defined as a person lawfully cultivating any land belonging to another person and the burden of proving that such person is not a bargadar and the land is in his personal cultivation shall be on the landowner. (iii) Failure to give such a receipt for the share of the produce will be punishable with imprisonment up to 6 months or a fine up to Rs.1000.

Though the Congress members in the West Bengal Assembly staged a walk-out when the Bill was moved, the Janata Government at the Centre delayed the giving of assent to the Bill for four long months, the Amendment is not as radical as one would expect from the left front Government. The Amendment does not give security of tenure to the sharecropper and the only stipulation that stands between him and the whims of the landowner is that the latter has to satisfy that the intended resumption of land is for the sake of 'personal cultivation'. Neither does the law accord ownership rights on the sharecroppers who have been cultivating the land for a prolonged period. All in all the law is modest effort and ^{the} Left Front Government has to ensure that no snags occur in the course of its implementation.

The Left Front Government has also tried to steer clear of extremism by refraining from reopening all the 56,000 cases in which the landowners have suspected to have evaded, to some

extent, provisions of the land ceiling laws. The Government wants to concentrate on about 1,250 owners suspected of holding over a hundred acres of land each and another 5,600, whose holdings are between 50 and 100 acres.⁴⁵

To give the Government credit, it is making vigorous efforts to detect malafide transfers of land and recovery of clandestinely retained surplus land, as well as incorporation of names as bargardars still unrecorded in the records of rights.

The Kisan Sabha and poor peasants are being actively associated with the implementation of such measures. Between August 1977 and March 1978, 8 lakhs bargardars were registered. To hasten the process of registration "Operation Barga" was launched in June 1978. Under it, the registration drive was to be intensified so that all the bargardars could be covered by June 30, 1979 - this programme has suffered a setback due to the flood problem that has beset the state.

In the field of land distribution among landless peasants, the Left Front Government has made some progress. During 1969-70, about 5 lakh acres of land were distributed. Out of this, 3 lakh acres of land were taken back by the landlords between 1972 and 1977.

Since July 1977 the CPM led Left Front Government redistributed 1.5 lakh acres and have also begun distributing the 2.5 lakh acres that were vested with the Government. Another 2 lakh acres were blocked because suits have been filed in courts by the landlords. To hasten the legal process, committees of lawyers have been set up for this purpose. (46)

45 BANERJEE (Sivadas), "Basu Ministry Moves Warily Modest Land Reforms in West Bengal", Times of India, Delhi, October 15, 1977.

46 VOHRA (Gautam), art. cit., p. 6.

The Government was also tried to devise the infrastructure needed to make the recipients of land withstand the pressure of the landowners to get back the land, by making them economically viable. To ensure that the peasants can obtain the inputs (seeds, fertilisers, irrigation facilities, credit) that are necessary, the Government has tried to constitute the co-operatives as institutions to assist the poor peasants. As the left front controls nearly 80% of the Panchayats, these will ensure that the fertilizers and seed quotas are obtained by the owners of distributed land as well as other small and marginal farmers.

The CPM affiliated Kisan Sabhas, which have 12 lakh members, with branches in all the districts and most villages, are assisting the Panchayats in rural development. They are also playing a major role in ensuring that 3.8 million agricultural labourers in the state receive the minimum wage of Rs.8 and 10 paise.

The CPM's attitude towards industrial relations has been the result of the internalization of the lessons learnt during the turbulent 1960s. The United Front leadership had been unable to control the militancy of the industrial workers; gheraos were misused to such an extent that the tactic was utilized by the United Front constituents to embarrass their rivals and ultimately against ministers of the United Front Government. According to Chand Joshi:

The CIU and CPM leadership realized that the uncontrollable violence meant that the working class was passing out of its effective control. The

backlash of spate of semi-spontaneous violence resulted in massive closure of mills, flight of capital and the workers being thrown into the streets. (47)

The CPM's industrial policy has four components (1) Labour disputes were to be settled by negotiations between the labour and employer; strike as an instrument of labour militancy is to be used as a last resort. 'The Left Front Government has successfully settled disputes in the interest of works and employees to a greater extent than elsewhere in India. The demands of the workers have become more moderate and the willingness to negotiate is also more evident. (ii) Along with improving the conditions of the urban proletariat, the CITU, trade unions wing of the CPM, seeks to politicise the workers. Its efforts are geared to the establishment of relations between the workers and employers on 'class lines'. (iii) A committee has been set up to go into the question of the closure of the various industrial units and factories. So far nearly 25 of the 31 old units have been opened and jobs given back to 30,000 people. (iv) The big industrialists and multinational corporations are being invited to invest in Bengal and to assist in economic development. In order to make this an attractive proposition, efforts are being made to press for a 'calm' industrial

47 JOSHI (Chand), "Spreading the Red Stars", India Today, April 1-15, 1978, p. 53.

48 BOSE (Arun), "Indian Communist Parties - Management Crisis", Times of India, April 19, 1978.

climate and maintain labour discipline, a far cry from the turbulent days of '67 and '69.

To sum up, the CPM's efforts have been aimed at various sections of the people in the state, whom it had alienated in 1967 and 1969. It is aware that a confrontation with the bourgeois--landed interests would invite central intervention.

3. New Political Situation

One of the most notable features of the political climate in India after 1977 is its heterogeneity. The Congress monolith which ruled the country for thirty years, lost power at the Central level in the March 1977 Lok Sabha polls. The authoritarian policies of the Congress which led to its repudiation at the polls, also resulted in a division of the party into two factions, one led by Indira Gandhi and the other by Congressmen like Chavan and Swaran Singh.

The Janata party, which took over from the Congress is likewise split into a number of factions, all of which are pitted against each other and struggling to assume a position of dominance vis-a-vis the rest. The Janata has not succeeded in establishing the kind of monopolistic dominance enjoyed by the Congress. Outside the Hindi belt, it does not have more than a nominal following in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, West Bengal, Nagaland, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. At the time of writing, the Janata party has split into two factions, the Janata (Secular) and Janata; the Janata (Secular) or Lok Dal rules at the Centre in partnership with the Congress (Swaran Singh), which in turn

has changed its nomenclature to Congress U (Urs), after the defection of Devraj Urs to the Congress (S). The Lok Dal is a caretaker government, till the Lok Sabha polls in January 1980 can give the country a government based on a majority in the Lok Sabha.

In such a fluid political situation, the left parties do not possess enough strength to pose any substantial challenge at the national level. But, at the regional level, the left parties have had a string of successes, for example, in West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, and Kerala. In Bengal, the CPM, for the first time, has been able to form a government, on the basis of its own majority in the State Assembly. The political chess-board is relatively empty as the Congress (I), Janata, CPI have not been able to provide joint opposition to the CPM led Left Front. The Central leadership is too weak and factionalized to intervene and instigate factionalism in the Left Front. Strict discipline within the CPM will prevent the violence and chaos that marked the two United Fronts. On the whole, the political situation signifies that for the first time, parties across the leftist spectrum, are in a genuinely competitive situation.⁴⁹ Whether they will exploit the situation by united action will decide the future of the left movement in India.

A political understanding between Janata government and CPM was forged after the 1977 Assembly polls, with the primary aim of preventing the revival of 'authoritarianism' as

49 ABRAHAM (A. C.), "Realistic Role for the Left", Times of India, January 6, 1978.

symbolized by the Congress party (the faction led by Mrs Gandhi). The CPM approach to the Janata (now Janata Secular or Lok Dal) is that of 'unity and struggle', i.e., support was to be given to the Janata Government's efforts to curb 'authoritarianism' and promote the democratic freedoms, opposition was to be directed against the Janata party, if it did otherwise. The understanding between the Janata and CPM is advantageous to the latter because it would act as a barrier however weak, against the revival of the Congress Party and it would keep the Janata Government at a safe distance. But, this understanding smacks of ambivalence. According to Ajit Roy:

There is an implied contradiction between the overall perspective of growing crisis, instability and mass struggle elaborate in the CPM's Draft Political Resolution, and the role visualized for the Left Front Government in Bengal. If the principal aspect of the situation is crisis and conflict, then the Left Front would have to confront the ruling class and be prepared to be getting short shift. In this context, the CPM's directive to the workers to defend their immediate interests is similar to leftism of CPI led government in Kerala. (50)

CPM's relations with the Janata Government have been cordial, in comparison to the UF Governments vis-a-vis the Congress Government at the Centre. The high incidence of gheraos and peasant movements that marked the tenure of both United Front Governments, have been conspicuously missing during the ministerial tenure (it has now completed two years) of the CPM led Left Front Government.

50 ROY (Ajit), "CPM's Draft Political Resolution", Economic and Political Weekly, vol. XIII, no. 8, February 25, 1978, pp. 408-9.

The CPM, never theless, has maintained a steady pressure against the existing Centre-State fiscal and monetary relationships, and emphasized the need to change them. This was the main thrust of the West Bengal Government's memorandum to the Finance Commission,

It makes a passionate plea to lift federal finance from a futile exercise of robbing Peter and paying Paul and make it development oriented. For this, the basic necessity is to enlarge the size of the divisive pool and to allow larger transfer of resources from the Centre to the States. The Memorandum makes four specific suggestions on sharing of the proceeds. (i) The surcharge of income tax should be brought under the divisible pool; (ii) 100% of the proceeds of the income tax together with the surcharge should be in the divisible pool, (iii) 50% of the Corporation Tax should be included in the pool (iv) all types of excise, special and regulatory duties should be brought to the divisive pool. (51)

An unprecedented situation was created when a separate meeting of the National Development Council took place in Chandigarh, in which Chief Ministers of Bengal, Punjab, Tamil Nadu participated. But, the West Bengal Government's demand for a radical change in the federal financial system, whereby the states will have greater powers to raise and deploy resources, was not appreciated by many states. It is argued that restructuring of Centre-State finances would necessarily favour the more developed states which would be in a better position to undertake additional resource-raising for their own development. 52

51 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, vol. XIII, no. 11, March 18, 1978, pp. 517-18.

52 Ibid., vol. XIII, no. 35, September 2, 1978, p. 1492.

4. CPM and the 1980 Lok Sabha Polls

The 1980 Lok Sabha polls has produced in Bengal, an electoral understanding between the Left Front led by the CPM, Lok Dal, Congress (Urs) and CPI, against the Congress (Indira Gandhi group), which is regarded as the main danger. The Left Front's propaganda offensive is directed to urge the people to vote for the Front candidates, with the emphasis on the dangers which the return of Mrs. Indira Gandhi would spell for the country.

The adjustments for allotment of seats give the CPM the opportunity to contest for 31 seats, 4 each for RSP and the Forward Bloc, 3 by the CPI, 17 for the Lok Dal and 19 for the Congress (U).

The CPM's electoral understanding with the Lok Dal, Congress (U), notwithstanding, there does not seem to be much scope for its further consolidation. It may have the same fate as the Left Front, Janata electoral understanding before the 1977 Lok Sabha polls, which was discarded after the objective (to defeat Mrs. Gandhi) had been attained. The Left Front manifesto does not talk of communal dominance in the Janata Party. It seems to be keeping its options open, as to which party, it should support, with the aim of participation in the Central Government. According to a report in the Hindustan Times,

The CPM may be readying itself for a possible understanding with the Janata Party in the event of the latter's need for support after the Lok Sabha elections in its possible bid

to form a government at the Centre. The CPM might soon realize, if it has not done so already, what blunder it has committed in backing the forces which split the Janata and led to its fall. The CPM's reappraisal of its stand vis-a-vis the Janata will, however, come more for the fear of a resurrected Mrs. Gandhi than for its liking for the Janata. (53)

While the CPM has made an alliance with the Left Front and has been allotted three seats to contest in the state, the cleavage continues between the official and pro-Indira, pro-Dange group. The Dange group, however, is weak in West Bengal, but it may result in splitting of CPI votes.

CONCLUSION

The 1977 election victory, for the CPM, denotes the coming of age for the party. It has realized that heightened militancy at this stage and social, political tensions will invite retaliation from the ruling class which it may not be able to survive.

The period under study is noteworthy for the steady improvement of political support for the CPM between 1967 and 1977. The attempt has been made to understand how the CPM consolidated its hold on the electorate, in the comparatively short period between 1967 and 1977. Two reasons have been put forward explaining the cause of the CPM's comfortable position vis-a-vis other political parties in the state in 1977.

Firstly it steadily consolidated its mass base among the urban and rural proletariat. The CPM used its stewardship of Ministries of Labour, Police and Land Revenue etc. (during first and second U.F. Governments) to encourage labour militancy and peasant movements, radicalize its image among the poor masses. Efforts were made to implement the land reform laws, benami land was distributed and 'a protect the peasants harvests' campaign was in full swing during the last days of the Second United Front Government. This "captured the imagination of the rural poor and led to the dismissal of the Second United Front Government".¹ Moves to prevent the CPM to form

1 MITTER (Swasti), Peasant Movement in West Bengal: Their Impact on Agrarian Class Relations Since 1967, University of Cambridge, Department of Land Economy, Occasional Paper No. 8, 1977, p. 44.

a Government after the fall of the Second U.F. Government, and the subsequent reign of terror against it served to further radicalize its image.

Secondly, timely adjustments of policy were made when some previous policies have failed to produce the desired result. But, the basic continuity in its policy was the consolidation of its influence among the rural and urban poor.

The CPM committed certain mistakes during its second tenure in Government in 1969.

The expansion of CPM's mass base was taken to such an extent that it resulted in encroachment on mass bases of its United Front partners. This naturally alienated the left parties, including the CPI, which led to politics of murder in the state and isolation of the CPM from the political mainstream of the state.

CPM's encouragement to labour and peasant militancy resulted in creation of unbearable strain on the system and tensions. The last days of the second UF government witnessed a flight of capital from the state.

Rapid deterioration of law and order was the result of inter-party conflicts and mass unrest. It alienated the middle class and caused the erosion of CPM's support in the metropolis of Calcutta. Cumulative effect was the alienation of bourgeoisie - landlord combine, the middle class in Bengal, the central government and other left parties. The result was retaliation on an immense scale, a process which started in 1970 and ended with the Congress Party's defeat in 1977.

During this 1970-77 period, CPM formulated its strategy which was to construct a front of left land democratic parties, in order to end its political isolation and to continue its policy of consolidating its links with the rural and urban 'oppressed'. The CPM has in the period between 1970 and 1977, built up a peasant movement, that has paid it rich dividends in the 1977 Assembly polls. The CPM peasant struggles have combined economism with political mobilization of the peasantry. Struggles were organized around the peasants immediate demands such as land, sharecropper's share of the harvest, procurement prices and wages for agricultural labourers. But, at the same time, Kisan Sabha activists have attempted to indoctrinate the militant peasants with Marxian concepts, for example, class struggle, by relating them to their experiences and struggles against landholders.

At the same time, the industrial workers have not been ignored, the CPM activists have tried to link the rural and urban struggles. Poor peasants' problems and defiance of rural vested interests have been highlighted and publicized in the form of Bengal Bandhs, protest meetings, rallies, hunger marches, in which people from urban and rural areas participated. The Marxists have tried not without success, to coordinate working class and peasant protest movements in Bengal, where the two have begun to feed one another to some extent.

1977 marked the triumphal advent of the CPM to power

2 SENGUPTA (Bhabani), Communism in Indian Politics, Delhi, Young Asia Publication, 1978, p. 390.

in the state and adjustments of policies followed. Though it claimed to ^{be} a revolutionary party, it admitted to reformism in Government. The main aim of the CPM is to last out its 5 years in office and receive a new mandate for another five year term of office. Care has been taken to soothe the sentiments of the various classes and interests in the state.

Attractive terms of profit have been given to encourage investment and emphasis has been placed on labour discipline, to appease the industrialists and multinational corporations.

Moderate amendments have been made to Bengal Land Reform Act; bargardars have not been given occupancy rights, neither have orchards, fisheries, lands held in charity, been included within land ceiling laws. These measures have been motivated to keep the big landowners happy.

The emphasis is on moderation, on clean and honest administration ^{and} not on radical peasant movements, which is partly a sop to the middle classes who are apprehensive about violence.

The CPM has an understanding with the Janata Party at the Centre, in order to keep Mrs. Gandhi's authoritarianism, which CPM fears most, at bay, and to give itself enough breathing space to give unhindered attention to the problems of the state.

The designation, as left front coalition is also aimed to appease the left parties, though for all intents and purposes, the CPM is the ruling party.

The CPM's policy after 1977, has been to bring all

likeminded parties together, so that Mrs. Gandhi's Congress can be opposed. In this context, can be understood, the electoral understanding with the CPI, Congress (U) and Lok Dal. After the 1980 Lok Sabha polls, the CPM may make an attempt to participate in the Central Government, by giving support to the Lok Dal or Janata, if any of these parties are in a position to form the Government. In the event of such a development, the CPM will be free ^{to} expand _^ its base on all India basis, with greater freedom.

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