

Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics

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This paper tries to see Indira Gandhi's period in Indian politics historically. It does not try to give a detailed historical account of its events, but to make sense of what happened. Do the events, beyond their quotidian diversity, show some pattern? Did Indira Gandhi's actions weaken, retard, rework, redirect the scheme of national reconstruction laid down by the earlier regime? What are their likely long-term consequences? This paper tries to ask some of these questions through a division of her term into four fairly obvious periods: 1966 to 1971, 1971 to 1975, 1975 to 1980 and from 1980 to her death.

NOTHING was less inevitable in modern Indian politics than Indira Gandhi's rise to power. Yet, as often happens in history, once it happened nothing was more decisive. It was modern Indian history's most crucial and indelible accident; for once this accident took place, other political necessities were restructured according to the logic of this single fact. Her coming to power was not dynastic, though subsequently it came misleadingly to appear that way. She was not prepared for premiership of India by Nehru for the simple reason that he could have foreseen his own death, but not Shastri's. Even after Shastri's death Indira Gandhi's election to power did not lie in the logic of history in any sense, it was not made to happen by the logic of either political support, control over party machinery, personal charisma or personal intrigues. She was elevated to the leadership of the Congress party through a negative decision, in one of the most difficult periods of the party's history, in the middle of a serious crisis of the Indian state. Two rather contrary reasons contributed to this—an impression of her weakness and ideological indistinctness, and an ability to metonymically extend the charisma of Jawaharlal Nehru,

Indira Gandhi came to power because she appeared to have a set of paradoxical political qualifications, most significantly, of indistinctness and ambiguity. To read the quality of personal decisiveness of her later years into her beginnings would be entirely wrong, because it would ironically destroy the means of knowing the process she became what she was. Evidently, the greatest qualification of Indira Gandhi at the time of her accession was her weakness, and the fact that she was not too strongly associated with any policy line to give offence to any of the groups which dominated the polycentric structure of the Congress party after Nehru's death.¹ Obviously, members of the group which supported her candidacy feared the decisiveness and dogmatism of Morarji Desai; but they were too jealous of each other to accept the dominance of any one among themselves. They therefore, chose Indira Gandhi because she did not represent anything too decisively. At that moment, she was the symbol of a stalemate; and this group had visions of enjoyment of that

rarest form of political power through remote control—which would have given the privileges of decision without its responsibilities. It was also possible for interest groups associated with the ruling elite to believe that she would make way after sometime for someone with clearer policy preferences, or if she survived, she could be encouraged, pressured or cajoled into line. Sometimes Indira Gandhi's regime is analysed by observers in terms of a "Caesarist" model from Gramsci,² but the initial conditions of her rule were anything but Caesarist. Hers was not a classically Bonapartist position in terms of Marxist theory, for the Caesarist elite is dominant over class and group interests when these contending groups are too closely balanced. Indeed, her position was of a kind of Caesarism in reverse' because her government seemed to be equally vulnerable to diverse forms of pressure. Even the mildest radical associations would have been fatal for her fortuitous rise to power. Such associations disqualified people like Krishna Menon from any importance in the post-Nehru Congress. To the Congress bosses she was a good candidate precisely because her symbolism of Nehru was in a sense false; she could, in their eyes, benefit from her connection with Nehru without any inheritance of his reformism.³ Purely politically, she had come into a situation of an even balance of political and group interests in which she was very weak; naturally, she wished to see a situation of even balance in which she held the balance. Thus her initial moves were unrelated to clear policy or strategic issues; they were simply devoted to working out a logic of political survival. In this respect, it is inappropriate to see parallels between Nehru and Indira Gandhi. To follow policies of any kind at all, even to follow the policies of her father, she had to survive. Initially, this logic of survival made her act pragmatically, but eventually, these *ad hoc* and individual initiatives altered the basic structure of Indian politics. We must however briefly turn to see what these structures were.

Indian politics in the Nehru period was coalitional in two senses.⁴ It was coalitional in a class sense, as Marxists claim, although there are differences among them about which classes or groups constitute the dominant coalition. It appears that the most

interesting and explanatorily successful model of this ruling group would see it as a combination of the bourgeoisie and the landed interests which meant after land reforms the rich peasantry, the major beneficiaries of this slow, disingenuous and uneven legal transformation, and the professional elites.⁵ To include the professional groups in the dominant coalition seems essential for several reasons. Coalitional politics is hardly ever 'spontaneous' arising from an unmediated coalescence of brute interest between dominant classes; it requires political mediation which is often provided by intellectual groups, which are, in this sense, conditions for the existence of the coalition. They are the major mediators between the state and the people, they perform an increasingly large role in the state sector after the bureaucratic translation of the concept of development (as opposed to a possible concept of development as a movement), and must be, in purely economic terms, one of the largest unequal beneficiaries of social transformation under Congress rule. It is also this group, or rather its directly political and bureaucratic segments which constantly arrange the mediation between the elements of the coalition itself. This element of the coalition has a direct interest in the large bureaucratic control over resources. That gives them the power of internal allocation of resources through their connection with and control of the bureaucracy. Planning, licensing, fiscal controls—this entire apparatus, so crucial to India's political economy, should be seen in double terms—both as strategies of economic development and strategies within the political coalition. It is in the interest of nearly every section in the ruling coalition (though not to an equal degree) to have large common funds in the form of state controlled resources, because they are politically negotiable resources on which a political demand may succeed. However, this constantly increases the allocative power of the third, professional element in the ruling bloc. These roles make them functionally crucial to the dominant coalition, but not its dominant partner. Most modern Marxist theories after Gramsci would make a distinction between domination (which is basically reckoned in terms of distributive arrangements and interests) and governance (which

is related to the actual use of legitimate, or even illegitimate, power), and would see the longevity capitalist democracy as being crucially related to this complex structure of power.⁶ While the power of the other groups arise out of their control over processes of production, theirs arise out of strategic control. When Indira Gandhi came to power this coalition was still in place although on the brink of serious changes.

It must be seen however, that this is not a picture of Indian politics in the narrow commonsensical sense, but rather of the "structure" that constrains its movement. As structure is a term used most commonly and confusingly let me state what I indicate by this. In politics structures would mean essentially long-term inelasticities, or long-term constraints on choice in policy matters. Structural elements are basic; but when we say something is basic in an explanation it means that something is latent. This means in turn that these cannot produce explanations by themselves, unaided by another level of explanatory exercise which takes into account more contingent facts, but they must figure in all explanations offered. The Structure and slow historical change of classes would form, in this sense, the structural frame of political analysis.⁷

There was however, a second sense in which Indian politics was coalitional: this was at the level of parties or political formations. Functionalist political scientists worked out an adequate model for this level in the late sixties through the idea of a one-party dominant system.⁸ The predominant fact of this model was the enormous space the ruling party occupied in the political system, reducing other parties to marginality. This made it pointless to try to understand politics according to the standard textbook format of government and opposition. Around a central, disproportionately large party of consensus were arranged much smaller parties of pressure, which imposed a coalitional logic on both government and opposition political groups. The simple size, regional spread, and ideological diversity of the Congress turned it into a loose organisation, with groups ideologically stretched across a spectrum from extreme right to mild radicalism. Opposition groups were so disproportionately small compared to the Congress that their success depended on their functioning more like indirect pressure groups. They could do this precisely because of the heterogeneity of the Congress structure and the consequent severity of its internal ideological conflicts. Often a political group inside the Congress would have more in common programmatically with a group outside but immediately neighbouring it in the political spectrum than with other Congress groups. On issues like planning, public sector, friendly relations with communist states the Congress left had shared objectives with Communists outside. Similarly, the Congress rightwing often shared public

policy preferences with conservative parties like the Swatantra. Thus a one-party dominant system imposed a coalitional logic on the groups inside the Congress as much as on the opposition. Policies were often decided effectively by cross party blocs rather than by inner party voting or a conventional division on lines of government and opposition.

This had a significant implication for the political options of the central elite within the Congress. For this showed that the central leadership of the Congress party could transfer a decision from the space within the party to the space of the political system as a whole if they were sure of the support of a winning coalition. When hard-pressed by the rightwing, Nehru came close to adopting such a strategy towards the end of his life, and this is what Indira Gandhi did in the crisis of 1969. Although he does not use an explicit model of this force, Max Zins's study of Congress crises shows that practically every serious conflict within the Congress was solved by a device of this kind.⁹ This coalition at the party level of course had to work within the constraints set by the "structural" coalition mentioned before. To put it another way, the structural coalition had to work through the party model, since classes and their interests are figured on the political arena by parties and other political formations the deep impulses of the first coalition had to express itself through the format of the second.

However, the fact that the nature of the class bloc was not basically altered at the time of Indira Gandhi's accession to power does not imply that significant political conflicts could not occur. I have argued elsewhere that serious conflicts within Congress should not be seen as mere power rivalry between personal factions, but as serious differences about development strategy.¹⁰ At the time of Indira Gandhi's accession to office the strategy chosen by the Nehru regime was going through its first significant crisis, serious enough for those who were opposed to it to ask for a renegotiation of its structure.

What sort of a crisis was this? Was this crisis really comparable to the foundational conflicts of the fifties? I think there were close parallels between the crisis of the fifties and the mid-sixties. The comparison is not only at the level of party; these were comparable in a deeper sense too. The crisis of 1951 was significant not only because they involved the two most powerful leaders of the Congress, Nehru and Patel; there can be personality clashes where serious historical consequences are not involved. But in this case so much else was condensed into the conflict between two individuals for they represented two ways of running the party organisation, two very different stances in foreign policy, and two different strategies of capitalist development. If the struggle had gone the other way, there is no doubt Indian capitalism would have followed a different

structure and historical sequence.

At first sight, the late sixties and early fifties may not appear comparable periods, and it could be objected that although there were political crises in both periods, the crises were not of the same kind. During the early fifties, it could be said, the Indian leadership were still untried, and its policy preferences were still indeterminate; in the late sixties, by contrast, all the canons of Nehruvian ideology were firmly laid out. This however is only superficially true. Developments over some years before Indira Gandhi's accession to power contributed to an unprecedented weakening of the Indian regime. Although Nehru's policy frame received a great deal of retrospective congratulation, at the time, it came up against stiff political resistance, and considerably polarised opinion about basic policy. After Nehru's death such opposition to his policies and pressure for renegotiation of policy naturally intensified. Foreign affairs contributed to these difficulties. The border war with China not only weakened Nehru personally; more fundamentally, it seemed to call into question the entire foreign policy which constituted such an important constituent of his overall strategy for development. Though the USSR adopted what must appear in retrospect an astonishingly neutral stance in a conflict between a communist and a bourgeois state, its influence and credibility declined. So did the power and credibility of the internal leftwing lobby which supported Nehru's foreign policy. Arms had to be hastily imported from the US, adding a significant and crucial element to the existing dependence on food aid.

The context seemed exactly right for an orchestration of internal and external pressure for a change not in the accent, but the basic design in policy.¹¹ Pressure from the World Bank made the government accept the Bell report, and soon after, under the pressure of a foreign exchange crisis, a sharp 36.5 per cent devaluation of the rupee. Internal pressure from business lobbies mounted for a more hospitable policy towards the private sector and western investment. These problems of dependence and restriction were exacerbated by the fear of crop failures and poor agricultural outputs. As a combination of all these, the government in the early years of Indira Gandhi faced serious constraints on its policy options. Not surprisingly, in subsequent periods, her public policy would concentrate on precisely these areas. The military objective was achieved by negotiating supplies from the Soviet Union, and later through a tendency to diversify military and technological supplies by buying from other western states, like France and England, purchases from whom, one suspects, had not only military but also political reasons. Economically, of course one of the major fronts of policy effort during Indira

Gandhi's regime was raising of agricultural output. At the end of her rule, these basic changes altered the structure of the government's field of choice. First, the Indian government is far less restricted in its basic decision-making than at the time of Nehru's death. Secondly, it also broke the direct causal line between food shortages and political crisis; it has as it were broken the phase between the economic and political crises of the state. Political difficulties have not gone away, indeed, they have become more complex, but they are much less direct consequences of crop failures and food shortages. The structure of political crisis has fundamentally altered since the mid-sixties. Thus, whatever Indira Gandhi intended to do, she did not attempt, as was uncharitably alleged in the mid-sixties, abandoning the design for an independent capitalism for the stiffer iniquities of a satellite growth.

COALITIONAL POLITICS

As it happened, however, Indira Gandhi headed off this orchestration of pressures by use of the logic of coalitional politics, through several political crises of the short term. Politicians do need crises. But crises can be, from their point of view, of two types; crises which break on them, and those of their own making. Indira Gandhi was able, through a combination of adroitness and good fortune to move from the first kind of crisis to the second. Sometimes the logic of situation may cut against the logic of structures allowing politicians to play off this asymmetry to create room for manoeuvre for themselves.¹² Unfortunately for Indira Gandhi the constraints arising out of the logic of structures and situations were for her grimly symmetrical. And those who brought her into power could always combine to over balance her if she showed signs of excessive independence. Thus her interest as a politician and those of the group which initially supported her were inversely related.

The way Indira Gandhi broke out of her constraints determined the course of later Indian politics. Her first constraints were her former allies, the state bosses within the Congress; and her first initiative was to play a variation of the strategic struggle Nehru had with Patel, and assert the supremacy of the parliamentary and governmental segment of the party against the organisational wing. Although as leader of government she had formal control over both the party and the government apparatuses, her ascendancy over these were clearly asymmetric. Bureaucratic structures were under her direct command by virtue of her being the head of government. Control over the party was largely nominal. The power of the Congress state bosses came from the basic structure of Congress politics since independence—its dependence on the support of local magnates for electoral support. Challenging the power of the state leaders was not just a matter of personality conflict. It could be

done by changing the nature of the Congress machine and the structure and nature of electoral support.¹³ Earlier forms of aggregation of local influence required two conditions, first, if assumed a low level of popular mobilisation, when the lower orders of the electorate voted on the advice of superordinant interests of some kind. Secondly, this also presupposed a loose and largely federal political machine in which negotiation of local support, at local prices, were left to local bosses of the Congress, Indira Gandhi correctly assumed that lower orders of people were becoming less inclined to vote on the basis of primordial controls, and soon the former system of indirect, partly patriarchal system would have to be replaced by something else.

If the dependence of the central leadership on the negotiating ability of the state leaders was to be dispensed with, it could be done only through a radically different electoral strategy, one in which the Central government, or its leader could set up a direct relation with the electorate. Accordingly, this change led not merely to a new style—of populist rhetoric instead of serious programmatic proposals; the new style had significant political and organisational results.¹⁴ Sometimes one comes across the apparently plausible argument that Indira Gandhi neglected to build up her party organisation, which implies that this was an accidental fault, and she need not have done so. She could have, so the argument runs, undermined and removed the individuals she found obstructive, and could have put more congenial or pliable people in their place. But this appears to me to misjudge the basic nature of the new politics. It seems, in retrospect, that the systematic destruction of the party apparatus was not contingent, it was a necessary part of the populist transformation of Congress politics. This argument should not be interpreted to mean that the electoral process—which is the basic discursive process linking the rulers with ordinary voters—became more economical. Ironically, centralised systems are often more complex and less economical than more decentralised ones. Congress election campaigns were still massive operations; what changed was not the size of the apparatus or the size of people involved, but their relation with the top leadership. Gradually, they became utterly heteronomous and substitutable instruments, and although *Faute de mieux* designated "politicians" they lost all contact with the essentially dialogical nature of the political process. Earlier this enormous retinue came from within the Congress party, they were politicians who were recruited through a stable and predictable procedure, worked patterned techniques of political negotiations and had a predictable scale of rewards. Politics, or this kind of discursive practice, requires a long process of acquisition of skills, familiarity of the political terrain, a career that takes long to

build up. Mediation by a party made up of functionaries of this kind led to two consequences in the earlier Congress system. First it made for decentralisation; secondly, it also made the organisation sensitive to peculiarities of local and regional politics—a fact which explains at least partly the far more sensitive and sensible handling of regionalism during the Nehru years.

Under the logic of the new dispensation this sort of regional structure was replaced by a new one. People who were pressed into political service were more in the nature of political Contractors' who were willing to go to any length to dragooon votes, systematically replacing discursive techniques with money and subtle forms of coercion. Thus, out of the logic of the technique Indira Gandhi brought in, Congress started becoming gradually depoliticised. Even earlier, people had regretted that arguments were being replaced by resources as the primary political asset; now the only arguments used were resources. Although Indira Gandhi is often accused of turning Indian politics ideological by conservatives, in fact, what she represented was a massive decline of ideology. Ideology did not mean serious disputation of the social programme underlying government policy, a debate about means and ends of national objectives. It came to a devaluation of political speech, a use of discourse for purposes utterly inimical to the purposes of discourse.¹⁵

Such a fundamental transformation of the relations which constitute our political world could not happen overnight. I also do not wish to suggest that the entire change of design was wholly deliberate, though they were certainly, as I argue, the results of interconnecting rational decisions taken *ad hoc* with short-term objectives in mind. It happened through two interconnected processes, first a change in the Congress apparatus, and subsequently a change of the relation between this apparatus and the general field of Indian politics. Indira Gandhi got the first opportunity for political restructuring after the defeat of the Congress in the fourth general elections in many state assemblies, and its less than reassuring victory at the Centre. One of the tests of a political leader is to what extent she can turn a defeat into a victory, to avoid responsibility for a defeat, and deflect it on to others. Indira Gandhi did this with remarkable success after the fourth general elections. She turned the consequences of Congress defeat into a condition for her own personal success. Congress defeat in the states, and the depleted majority at the Centre imposed a coalitional logic on her and the Congress. Indeed it intensified this logic to its limit point, which prepared the ground for its decisive transformation. Since she was cornered within the party, she used the familiar technique of invoking the wider, national coalition. In trying to fight her internal opposition she inclined towards a strategy

of a wider coalition of the near left. In this, fortuitously, the group known as the CSF (Congress Socialist Forum) played a crucial role, enabling her to build a bridge across a long-standing history of suspicion.

As a weaker player inside the Congress she intuitively grasped an aspect of the political situation—that the timetable of her adversaries had to be initially her timetable too. As a weaker player she could not hope to set the terms of the game, she could simply try to win it within terms set for her by others. This was simultaneously true of all adversaries she faced—international forces, political opposition within India and her especially intimate enemies within the Congress parties. Others could think of choosing their time, of delaying a decision; she, because of her circumstances, could not. She could however, have a shorter timeframe than others. It was politically rational for her to forestall others by acting quickly. Every time she did this—acting with decisiveness—the consequences fell more benevolently for her than for her enemies. After accepting the time horizon of her tormentors, she decided to act quickly, before others had decided what to do. Thus, within three years after the elections of 1967, she could seize the initiative and impose her terms on other's. She provoked a crisis in the Congress when the state bosses thought she would not dare. She declared her leftwing policies with deliberate suddenness and chose the grounds of the conflict. She took up the challenge of the Bangladesh crisis without flinching, and forestalled other pressures by the treaty with the USSR. This way she could always be the giver and not the receiver of surprise.

The results of the 1967 elections had some clear implications, for those who were willing to see them. It confirmed a line of thought that communists had been developing for sometime in their party documents. The one party-dominant model offered two planes of self identification for political groups. By the constitutional criterion, they could be seen as government and opposition, but more significantly, by use of an ideological criterion, they could be stretched along a continuum from left to right with the Congress occupying the ambiguous and profitable zone in the rightish middle which allowed it to shift its centre of gravity conveniently as the situation demanded. Since the early sixties the communists were worried by a different possibility: that this party system might be, under the stress of a crisis, get split down the middle, and was a wide arc of a rightwing coalition of Jan Sangh, Swatantra, rightwing socialists and Congress, conservatives might emerge and revoke much of the reformist nationalist policy structure of Nehru's Congress. This would of course immediately bring into existence a left coalition and they thought that the future of Indian politics depended on the speed with which either of these

possible coalitions could get organised, because the first to appear would have an uneradicable advantage over the other. Indira Gandhi too saw this logic; and more importantly, she saw that the CPI saw this logic; and she acted on the basis of this political perception when she had to tackle the crisis within her party over Congress presidency, thus converting a party issue into a national one. If it had been decided simply within party terms, she was likely to be defeated, but given the strategic form she gave to it, she simply could not lose.

But the elections of 1967 showed another implication for opposition politics. It revealed an interesting and recurrent paradox of party politics. In a period of economic difficulties and declining legitimacy of the Congress a wide opposition coalition had a good chance of success, partly of course, because it simply offset the usual disadvantages of simple majorities; i.e., a united opposition meant that to win the Congress required something close to an absolute majority. Experience of the next few years however, showed that the coalition technique which worked so wonderfully for the Congress, did exactly the opposite in case of the opposition. Electorally, right and left parties working together widened their electoral support, and made winning elections possible. But the same thing made any reasonable administration by the opposition impossible. Coalitions which could win elections could not govern, and coalitions which could run administrations (if they were more ideologically more homogeneous, like the CPI(M)-led front in West Bengal) could not win. Consequently, most states which had slipped out of Congress control came to be recaptured within a few years. In all this there was a certain pattern; Indira Gandhi broke out of her political encirclement almost always by a similar move. Through an arrangement of issues in a political crisis of her making she wiped out the record of the earlier period; she forced not only the electorate but also other parties to take vital decisions episodically rather than in a longer term way, i.e., not allowing them to decide about her regime on its basic record over a long period of time which makes for rational and less dramatic decisions, rather forcing them, by a break of some kind, to take sides on all or none sort of choice. No other Indian politician had used to such effect the art of brinkman(?)ship.

After 1967 Indira Gandhi consistently took the initiative in the repeated crises which punctuated her time in power. She forced the issue in case of the Congress presidency, in case of the presidential elections, in formally splitting the Congress, in the decisions about the Bangladesh crisis, in the declaration of the emergency, even, ironically, in case of the elections of 1977 which led to her defeat. Her ascendancy was so great that the opposition could not even defeat her until she invited them to do it.

Till the emergency, all her initiatives were such that it kept the opposition divided, and deepened and intensified their division. Ironically, Indira Gandhi was initially more successful against her own party than against the opposition. But the way she accomplished her victory foreshadowed a format, a logic of crisis solving which had to be applied repeatedly in her regime. Her call to the Congress members in the presidential elections to vote for a candidate showed a disregard for institutional norms which was essentially different from Nehru's. It is false to treat this as a matter of style, as the beneficiaries of such evasions would suggest. It was a failure to appreciate the requirement of formal, impersonal principles, of the theory of a capitalist (or perhaps in her terms a modern) social form.¹⁶ A bourgeois system requires, as both Marxists and Weberians point out, a logic of "rationalisation", greater impersonality and predictability of decisions, and a building of institutions to control modern processes. Initial evasion of institutional controls during Indira Gandhi's rule was highly significant, for they were not always desperate moves to avert crises, but systematic to see their usefulness. In retrospect, it was not only a personal fault of hers. During her rule, an entire political elite grew up which looked at the processes of development through fatal simplifications, reducing institutions, (e.g., education) to merely their material structures and budgets. Typically, such evasions were accompanied by a rhetoric of radicalism—a particularly dangerous combination of a bourgeois leader invoking socialist principles to evade encumbrances of bourgeois constitutionalism.

This was reflected in Indira Gandhi's treatment of other leaders of her own party after the rout of the syndicate, her inexplicable sensitivity to people who could never become in any sense serious contenders to her eminence. She seems to have always confused between the political necessity of reducing an individual and the historical folly of reducing the role along with the institutional structure which support and frame it. As a result, one finds an increasing hiatus between two levels of politics which could be called its surface and deep structures. On the surface, after the decline of opposition coalitions Congress ministries came to power in most states, but at the bottom political instability and its effects did not go away, but only changed form. Instead of a highly visible instability in which unstable and constantly fissile coalitions of opposition groups came and went out of power, there was an endless turnover of ministries within the seeming continuity of Congress rule. In an atmosphere in which politics was anyway becoming less ideological, this often meant wild shift. of populist emphasis in policies. At a deeper level, there was an even more fundamental reversal.

Formerly, the legitimacy of a politician depended on some impression of being fair, evenhanded in his handling of interests, however disingenuously; because minimally, politician glimpsed the bourgeois liberal view that the state was supposed to be the representative of general or universal interests, and the play of particular interests should be left to the field of the 'civil society'. Increasingly now, politicians were seen to be legitimised not by their claim or pretence to universalism, but by their evident and aggressively declared affiliation to particular interests. Installation of a middle caste chief minister, for example, could openly mean imminent advantages for this caste—which, though perhaps culturally understandable, goes against the logic of any viable large scale operation. Indian society is so heterogeneous that this meant that building of legitimacy on general principles would become practically impossible. Such groups and their leaders also became correspondingly dependent on a distant, all-powerful central leadership for concessions and mediation. Essentially, it was an extension of the politics of heightened insecurity of groups, since in India every member of a majority is a member of a minority of some kind. The destruction of the state level leadership intensified the need for a populist structure of politics where a central leader could appeal successfully to the electorate through a suitably simplified, unmistakably large-grained theme. The earlier ambiguity and complexity of electoral appeal was sacrificed for a clear, if rhetorical, national platform. Earlier processes which acted as filters in recruitment were given up. The party became an anteroom, a waiting room for entirely insignificant aspirants for high office. As a political instrument the party became redundant, illustrated by the fact that even the subtlest of political negotiations were handed over to officials rather than partymen. Electorally, of course, Congress did not win the elections for Indira Gandhi, she won them for Congress.

By the time the next round of significant political events came along, the two basic tendencies associated with Indira Gandhi's rule were clearly at work: a revival of the fortunes of the Congress at the surface, and a simultaneous destruction of its party structure at a deeper level. Despite its well known infirmities, factionalism in the Congress—at the Centre at least—had been partly ideological. Increasingly, the programme of the Congress, over which there had been so much of ideological bloodshed, came to be replaced by a platform of a different kind—not prepared through a debate over a long period, in which contending interests fought to shape, its idiom and its possible influence over policies. The internal scene in the Congress became close to a situation Marxists call Bonapartism, i.e., because of the stalemate in the strength of organised groups, decisive decisions come to be taken

"by a group or individuals who are relatively independent of them. Although in a statistical and sociological sense organised interests are weightier than individuals or coteries, there could be a situation in which such groups, despite their weight, become increasingly dependent and forced into a client relationship with a political leadership. Organised groups require stable structures of representation to translate their preferences into political programmes. With the decline of such institutional spaces and formats, ideology, freed in a sense from the anchoring in interest lobbies within the Congress, became more irresponsible, prone to sudden and baffling shifts of emphasis. During the emergency, suddenly and inexplicably fertility and not poverty became the major obstacle to Indian development.

Clearly, this unpredictability was a powerful electoral weapon, for it made Indira Gandhi's ideological moves unpredictable, an emphasis on distributive justice today could suddenly turn into a rhetoric of productive discipline to the chagrin and detriment of others who suffered from the disadvantages of political consistency. But in terms of deeper concerns for political stability, this was destructive, for it devalued political ideas, and disturbed the logical pursuit of a consistently worked out long-term policy.

II

By a series of measures after her split with the organisation Congress, Indira Gandhi relentlessly drove the logic of coalitional politics, constantly increasing her payoffs. The same drive, carried on through the nationalisation of banks, abolition of privy purses and related measures, won her a double victory, first against her enemies within the party, second, no less decisively against the opposition. Since the elections saw an extension of the logic of a "progressive coalition", Congress continued its association with the CPI; but this was less a necessity of political arithmetic, more for production of ideological conviction. It already showed how the success of a strategy made that strategy redundant.

Indira Gandhi dissolved Parliament when the trend was strongly in her favour, a bare three months after the initiative to abolish privy purses. In retrospect, the timing of the elections turned out fortunately for her, for she could face the worst international crisis of her career with the elections behind her, not in front, much the safest way politically. Nonetheless, facing the crisis over Bangladesh required other resources and other skills, because assets like a large majority did not translate simply into resources in foreign policy. Perhaps the most dramatic test of her government came at the end of 1970 when the crisis broke out, putting her in a situation of considerable pressure, a situation fraught, as most decisive situations are, with serious contradictory possibilities. The scale

of the refugee influx from Bangladesh made its economic costs heavy, but the prospect of a war with Pakistan was in some ways equally forbidding, as India was emerging from a period of threatened isolation. Soviet attitude towards India had changed considerably after Nehru's death, and their overtures with the Ayub regime sometimes created discernible strains with India. On the American side, the Nixon administration tilted US policy heavily against India, in an accentuation of the eternal paradox of American foreign policy—its steadfast preference for an avowed dictatorship to a democracy. China too could be expected to favour Pakistan. Risks of isolation were considerable and quite real. A possible war with Pakistan and the creation of a friendly state in the east could, however, alter the strategic balance considerably, and reduce the requirement for military preparedness and related costs, at least so it was believed at the time.

During the Bangladesh crisis Indira Gandhi showed her qualities of decisiveness. The treaty with the Soviet Union was sudden and remarkably effective in counter-balancing American support for Pakistan. The ineffectual brinkmanship of the Nixon government at the height of the war, though calculated to confuse and undermine her government, actually turned to her distinct advantage. After the victory in the Bangladesh war, she reached the climax of her leadership and power. However, there is a remarkable fact about this period of glory: it was intense but curiously brief, which goes on to illustrate the sense in which Marxists use the notion of a long-term or a general crisis. Such periodic advantages cannot be converted into stability of the system as a whole. But for the time, her position seemed literally invincible, because it was based on the invincible combination of radicalism and patriotism: for those who would not support her for the promised removal of poverty could do so for the liberation of Bangladesh; and those who would not support the strength of India would for the eradication of poverty. She had characteristically reduced the opposition to a state of being without any possible slogan: promise of reform outflanked the left just as much as patriotism outflanked the right.

Some aspects of the 1971 elections were extremely significant, because these would become permanent features of her rule. Indira Gandhi broke the normal schedule for elections, calling a mid-term poll. Earlier, the constitutional system created an implicit symmetry between the government and the opposition, which could both prepare equally for elections at a preset time. Elections, from now on, would be set by the ruling party, which meant that the issues on which the elections would be fought could be structured with a degree of deliberation unseen before. Elections under her turned into something very close to referenda. No longer were these formal occasions in which

the electorate gave a reasoned verdict about the necessarily complex record of a government's performance over five years. Instead, these became occasions when the electorate was asked to take sides on a highly simplified, dramatic, emotive and misleadingly rhetorical question (i.e., questions to which there could be, barring perversity, only one answer)—like whether they wished to see poverty removed. Of course this raises some difficult problems of the culture of power in our country. It is astonishing how the Congress could claim ideological advantage by thundering against its own failures. As the government party a substantial part of the blame for our bleak performance about poverty must lie at its door; yet it was able to claim the allegiance of the poor, precisely by such appeals. Turning elections into referenda of course made more decisive and dramatic victories possible, by making one single issue take precedence over a complex record. But, ironically, it also made electoral results, less reliable as an indicator of real historical trends, or the actual configuration of political forces. For the basic questions of distributive justice did not go away; simply a curtain was drawn before it at the time of elections. Victory in elections came to reflect less of the real balance of political forces in the country. This is why the textbook translation of electoral majority and power to administer effectively simply breaks down in Indian politics after 1971. The size of the majorities become larger; the power of the governments to administer the country becomes distinctly less effective. Nehru never had majorities of the size Indira Gandhi or Janata enjoyed; his governance was far more effective than theirs. Thus it was possible for a government to be decisively victorious and pitifully vulnerable at the same time. That is why even at the times of her greatest victories Indira Gandhi remained so close to defeat. And this is at least one reason why even after her triumphs she herself could speak of crisis, encirclement and disaster. For the politics of electoral populism did not give her organised strength to pursue more radical policies, or act for political stability or move effectively in the direction of greater distributive justice. This is why despite the rout of the opposition her regime remained permanently insecure. Opposition politicians and her critics occasionally argue that this insecurity was a pretence, simply a technique of gathering support by panic, by turning elections into stampedes. But this is not true. By the nature of her politics, Indira Gandhi lived, in quite a literal sense, close to both victory and disaster.

All these trends, in their conjunctions, set in motion a peculiar but increasingly evident disjunction between electoral balance and the deeper balance of political forces, the balance of satisfaction and dissent among social classes. This translation broke down, reflected in the dramatic trend of mortality

of governments in their relative infancy. After her spectacular successes at the end of 1971, her government, armed with the same majority in Parliament, was in deep trouble by 1973—which meant that such majorities had in some sense become "misleading", that some crucial translation in the political process was failing to come off. In this phase, because of a form of politics which is similar to bonapartism linear expectations were completely falsified. Politics increasingly assumed a volatile and pulsating form, reflected in its electoral or phenomenal form as a "politics of waves", or of radical negations.

What is remarkable is not the way Indira Gandhi won her legitimacy in these years, but the way she lost it. One of the decisive differences with the Nehru period is precisely this short tenure nature of this legitimacy: the new politics set up between the electors and the rulers a new relationship, as long at least as the vote remained a register of political sentiment. It meant that support given overwhelmingly could also be withdrawn with a dramatic suddenness; the electorate imposed a much more short-term accounting of the results of political support. Electoral figures show this particularly clearly, despite the objection that the percentage of Congress votes remains more or less constant, and therefore the fluctuations are simply the unintended consequence of an insufficiently mastered machinery of simple majorities. But this can be answered by the argument that this format of pluralities is itself part of the format of choice, and therefore results could not be attributed to purely unintended consequences of public choice. For, after all, the way the field is structured is one of the factors taken into account in the electorate's deliberate strategy for voting.

UNPRECEDENTED POLITICAL CRISIS

Within two years of her greatest political ascendancy, Indira Gandhi's government was in deep trouble, facing an unprecedented political crisis. Some of the factors which led to this crisis would be umegistered in long-term statistics.¹⁷ First, of course, there was the inherent dangers of radicalised distributive expectations. If electoral promises raise people's expectations, this could lead to a real performative paradox; for even a performance which was roughly equal to earlier periods would appear poorer because of the government's own move to set higher performance criteria. Secondly, economic trends went against the government: some of the circumstances which fuelled the crisis would be difficult to register in long-term statistics; indeed, use of long-term statistics make unnecessary and inexplicable mysteries out of the short-term finalities of political life. Sometimes political resentments which have far reaching consequences have purely local or regional origin in avoidable inequalities of distribution, Or short-term

abuse of administrative power. Thus although official statistics show a relatively minor shortfall in food production in 1972-73 and in per capita availability of foodstuff, shorter-term inelasticities created by defective distribution created serious political turmoil. Similarly, although a long-term rate of inflation in the Indian economy is not high by international standards, what affects political behaviour is precisely what hides and disappears within the average. For ordinary people perceived the period from 1971 to 1974 as one of the most serious inflationary rises in the Indian economy. Between these years wholesale prices of rice, wheat and pulses went up sharply, and although these may have tapered off later, this would have happened after its political consequences began and developed an autonomous logic of its own. Food shortages in Gujarat set off political trouble in December 1973, starting a chain of events which led to the most serious rupture in Indian political experience since independence.

Political trends after the end of 1973 showed some unprecedented trends. Since mid-fifties, after the strange decline of the socialist base in North India, most mass movement policies of the Central government were either regional protests or movements led by radical parties of the left. Regional movements by definition could not lead to a national coalition of threatening proportions. Leftist politics had suffered a setback in the mid-sixties partly through the nationalist backlash after the war with China, and partly through internal division. Since 1967 however there was a resurgence of leftist opposition to the government in various forms, through the UF governments and later through Naxalite insurgency. By 1971 however these challenges were spent through a combination of containment and repression. Regionally, and culturally too, these challenges could be more easily marginalised, because left movements were never strong in central heartland of India, the major area of Congress support. The movement in Gujarat and its spillover into the IP movement in North India was a movement of a different kind. It was the first serious mass movement organised by opposition groups in which some rightwing elements were strongly represented, because there is no doubt that the major organisation of the JP movement in the north came from the cadres of the Jan Sangh, parties which would in August 1974 form the BKD a combination of rightwing, chauvinistic elements and rightwing socialists. This showed a significant alteration of political forces in India in comparison to the Nehru period. Then, despite serious disproportionality of strength, the left constituted the more serious opposition to the Congress. By 1974 it was clear that the more serious opposition to the Congress was offered by a non-left alliance; and more significantly, it seemed to confirm the picture of a wide

rightwing coalition which might overwhelm the Congress.

In fact, the rapid growth of the JP movement also stemmed from the logic of the new politics which had come into being since the early seventies; but naturally, with the inability of politicians to see historical trends Indira Gandhi was incensed when this logic tended to turn against her. It showed the effects of the quickening of the political accounting cycle, the same redundancy of political institutions. In fact what was remarkable was the similarity between the two sides in the great confrontation: the same resort to populism, the same reluctance to go by institutional norms, the same tendency to substitute a programme by a personality, the same shortsighted eagerness to ride a popular wave of negative indignation, the same confusion between what was a defeat of its opponent and a victory of its own, Indira Gandhi's sense of encirclement was heightened by her own initiatives earlier in destroying left bases. Fortunately for her, ideological considerations stopped the major left groups from joining with the JP movement.

In other ways too the success of the Gujarat and Bihar agitations were related to the politics of populist referenda. As electoral results were no longer a reliable register of political assessment, people felt, soon after the elections were over, that their longer term problems had not gone away. Since elections were not due for a long time, this led to pressures for agitations outside the constitutional space, eventually to a demand for a dismissal for these massively supported elected ministries. It would be too simplistic to believe that those who elected these governments and those who agitated for their removal were entirely discrete groups of people. This was a direct nature of the changed character of elections, though Congressmen did not see it. They even pretended to find the demand outrageous, although this was a fairly regular occurrence within their own party, or what was left of it.

This hypothesis appears to be confirmed by the swing of political crises after the Gujarat agitation. From Gujarat it spread to other states where Congress had fairly comfortable majorities, and on electoral showing these states should not have been found ungovernable so quickly. From the end of May the government faced another serious challenge in the form of the railway strike one of the largest and longest among industrial demonstrations after the Nehru era. It was put down brutally, to the inappropriate allegory of the truckers' strike against the Allende regime in Chile. By the end of August seven opposition parties had formed the BKD with the odd programme of a "total revolution" coming incongruously from some of the most conservative of Indian political groupings. Party politics in India seemed in 1974 to have a particularly dim future, Indira Gandhi having destroyed

her party practically, and JP suggesting their abolition formally. Spread of the agitation to the central states in India must have appeared particularly alarming to the regime. On the other side, Indira Gandhi's apparent invincibility in elections must have also rendered the route of anti-government agitations outside the electoral framework attractive to some parties.

The Congress response to the gathering crisis was seriously jeopardised by Indira Gandhi's populism. Her initiatives had systematically shifted functions, initiatives and decision from party to government bureaucracy; and the slogan of a "committed bureaucracy" was explicable in these terms, since the unavailability of partymen forced her to demand increasingly explicit political work from high officials. But this worked to a point. Countering a mass agitation politically was something that officials could not perform. A technique which made her electorally invincible made her, when faced with popular agitations, extremely vulnerable. Accordingly she found herself resourceless in dealing with the political agitation, which required the construction of an alternative political discourse, which can communicate to people another construction of political reality and their own experience. As the government party lacked an effective party machinery, since it had long given up a politics using discourse for a politics using resources, the elite around Indira Gandhi had two options—to borrow a political organisation and face the JP movement politically, or to respond by using the massive apparatus of the state. Initially, the Indira Gandhi regime tried a political answer through its collaboration with the CPI which had a mass base in Bihar. But since it was too small and proved ineffective, the only recourse left was eventually a repressive and bureaucratic solution. The CPI particularly responded to Indira Gandhi's call for support, seeing a danger of fascism arising one-sidedly from the JP movement, and reading the situation through allegories of the Weimar republic and Allende's Chile. But even to a non-allegorical reading of the situation, there were deeply disquieting signs. There was something deeply unconvincing in political groups which had been more concerned about the Hinduisation of India, or the spread of Hindi or the demands of rich farmers, and had never been known for sympathy for revolutionary causes being suddenly won over to a revolution of a most immoderate kind, in comparison to which even the communist conception was merely partial. Besides, most of these parties, when in government, had shown a remarkable ability to tolerate corruption too suddenly resolved to stamp it out of political life. Undoubtedly however, the movement under JP Narayan's leadership became the most serious challenge to Congress government in North India, and by the first quarter of 1975 Indira Gandhi's government faced its

most serious crisis. On top of this came the unexpected judicial invalidation of her election on June 12, 1975. Congress, in its new form, was entirely unable to deal with it. Without a clear internal line of command, without strong party institutions, Indira Gandhi eventually decided not to step down from premiership, but escalate the problem even more by declaring the Emergency—seeking a solution beyond the format of democratic government. A party which had grown accustomed to the indispensability of an individual was flung into confusion when this came to clash with needs of constitutional form.

III

Curiously, although the Emergency represented a deeply significant phase of our political history, and showed in different ways both the vulnerability and the strength of Indian democracy, it has been rarely seriously analysed. Some amount of purely empirical and journalistic material is of course available, besides the enumeration of events catalogued by the Shah Commission.¹⁸ Still, the question of what happened in the individual instances of abuse of power is quite distinct from the historical question of what something like the emergency signified. It is a mark of the acuity of Indian political science that so little has been done by way of a serious study of this most deviant phase of our political existence. Obviously, one major handicap was the inapplicability of our well rehearsed moves of "the scientific method" of electoral studies on this particular area, which meant that our discipline's entire training in the last fifteen years became simply and heart-breakingly redundant. It also means that scientifically inclined students of politics are perpetually condemned to a state where we can never have scientific knowledge of the emergency years. Scientific studies, fortunately, were resuscitated in 1977. But apart from political science literature too, there is little serious study of the emergency, probably on the cheerful assumption that it was an aberration unlikely to be repeated.

Two radically different explanations are offered for the imposition of the emergency, both of which are exaggerated forms of what are basically sensible ideas. Sometimes it is argued that the emergency lay in the logic of a structural crisis in India's political economy. I am basically in sympathy with this view, although I consider the fatalism and determinism implicit in some forms of this argument unacceptable. But surely there were long-term crisis tendencies in the Indian system, and they came to a head through Indira Gandhi's personal difficulties precisely because of the trends towards centralisation and condensation of problems. A second view holds that the crisis leading to the emergency was purely contingent; its reasons lay in her personal unwillingness to give up power—which is true in quite a

different sense—that it was after all her difficulties which created the occasion for emergency rule. There is no deep incompatibility between the two theses if one thinks of long-term structural tendencies as not producing events by themselves, but constraining developments in a particular direction, and waiting on contingent causalities of a secondary kind of causation of particular events and their exact shape.

Imposition of the Emergency from the government side was done on the excuse that two things were getting out of hand and the Central government required exceptional powers to deal with them. The first of course was a threat to the unity and integrity of the country, dubiously equated with the ruling party's dominance. A second and perhaps more popular rationalisation of the Emergency was that it was meant also to negotiate the inflationary situation—an immensely popular slogan, understandably, for the middle and the lower classes. Actually, as happens with moves which the regime expects to be intensely unpopular, the Emergency promised everything to everybody, setting to itself entirely incompatible objectives. To the bourgeoisie, it offered a perfect climate of industrial discipline; to the middle classes lower prices and better administration; to the poor the abolition of poverty; to every citizen the assurance of their country's integrity. More seriously, although this was perhaps not done deliberately, in the rationalisations of the Emergency there was a tendency to turn around all the allegations of the JP movement—its allegations of inefficiency, corruption, inflation. In a piecemeal fashion the government and its supporters made out a case that there were another—the real—set of reasons for these undoubted evils of social life. Commonsensically, all these could be attributed to the government and its manner of functioning—its unresponsiveness to popular demands, its bureaucracy, the cynical wastefulness of its public sector managerial groups, the increasingly less scrupulous behaviour of political leaders. Implicitly, if the unrestricted abusive rhetoric of the emergency could be euphemistically regarded as an argument, the government paradoxically decided to blame its failures on itself in a specially disingenuous way. After all, the problems of corruption, inefficiency and to a lesser extent inflation were all related to transactions in which agencies of government were primary actors and the ordinary citizens were recipients; and such arguments suggested an ungovernability of the government rather than of the citizenry. Yet much of the early justification of the Emergency was given in these pragmatic terms, mixed occasionally with the terrifying allegories of fascism.

After the initial months, when the political crisis was over, the Emergency became increasingly pointless, and it became increasingly oppressive in trying to hide its

pointlessness. On its own account, the government's showing in economic terms was not much better than in normal times, except for a discernible drop in some consumer prices during the early part of the Emergency. This too was due to unfounded fears of retailers about a sudden and improbable alteration in the moral behaviour of the police and the lower bureaucracy. They found out through experience that structural tendencies were not so easy to countermand, even by an authoritarian government; and Emergency did not end corruption, but understandably, due to higher risks involved, steeply pushed up its price. At a more serious level of argument, a more authoritarian government is hardly the proper climate for a decline in bureaucratic corruption; you cannot make a group of people less corrupt by making them collectively more powerful. Indeed, had this been true most of the Third World tyrannies would have set examples of moral probity.

It is hardly surprising that non-accountability made government agencies persist in their irrationalities. Absence of the usual requirements of public scrutiny and criticism meant that tendencies towards centralisation and personal concentration of power could grow unchecked. Instead of effort at building the party, Congress went through a curious policy of induction of members into the Youth Congress, providing a platform for the rise of Sanjay Gandhi. This not merely led to the well known unconstitutional uses of power and irrational excesses of the family planning and beautification drives, which naturally fell most heavily on the poorest. It also carried to its extreme the internal reallocation of power within the Congress elite, leading to the gradual decline of the group of more professional advisers around Indira Gandhi. This meant not only an increase in arbitrariness, but also loss of consistency, for midway during the Emergency, the government started discussing the advantages of a more conservative form of economic policy. Under normal conditions of democracy, political initiatives, when they show unpopular or dysfunctional consequences, make for their own abandonment. In an authoritarian regime such dysfunctions could continue unchecked; for it is inconceivable that any political regime would have continued with the excesses of the sterilisation drive or could have been so uniformed or insensitive towards popular opinion. Authoritarianism made the government behave more ignorantly.

In another sense, the Emergency performed a demystifying function in the political system. After the 1969 split, after the destruction of the Congress machinery, there had been a growing tendency towards bypassing the regular consultative political process, and its replacement by a bureaucratic and administrative manner of decision making, withdrawing in effect the most

significant decisions about the country's development from the public political process and its institutions of formal accountability. Its cause was the massive majorities of the ruling party. This had a terrible, but subtle consequence: withdrawal from the regular consultative processes within party and Parliament made the political process more violent. For the only way of being heard was to create noise. Ironically, although much of the rhetoric in undermining bourgeois democratic institutions were derived from old socialist arguments about the social conservatism of the judiciary, actually the subtle eclipse of Parliament went much deeper than the explicit eclipse of the judicial institutions. This is because the judiciary is given some powers of institutional self defence by the constitution, but Parliament is helpless against its own sovereignty. Marginalising the opposition, not letting it speak effectively had unfortunate consequences for constitutional politics as a whole. For this meant that grievances and dissent, deprived of channels of legitimate articulation and hearing, would erupt more violently; and increasingly on a larger number of issues, the space for discursive politics would be given up, and government and dissenting groups would face each other more violently.

Ironically, however, the destruction of the opposition also destroyed the justification for the Emergency. In course of time both arguments for the Emergency faded into insignificance. Though Emergency itself could be seen as a degeneration of ordinary democratic government, midway through it, it turned into a degeneration of this degeneration. Earlier, to the politically gullible, it could have appeared as a move against rising fascism, though its own ways of fighting fascism were very intriguing indeed. After the opposition movement was effectively contained, the argument about political insurrection could not be sustained with the same liveliness (despite some good work by Congress propaganda machinery which printed posters in which Indira Gandhi stood dividing anarchy and Utopia much the way god did light and darkness in renaissance paintings); this deprived the regime of Emergency of the reasons it had given for its own existence. The second, supposedly economic reason was belied by the performance of the government in the later part of the Emergency which was not significantly different from any other unruly democratic year. It seemed increasingly that the entire apparatus of authoritarian rule was preserved to secure immunity of criticism against the rise of Sanjay Gandhi and increasing violence of the state against the unsterilised and unbeautified poor. People were also irritated by constant sanctimonious lecturing by an inefficient government about more work and less talk—again a characteristically self-referring admonition. For grocers, peasants, workers, fisher-

men, for instance, were not exemplarily garrulous communities; the only people who could afford such diversion during their hours of work were government employees. They were therefore supposed to apply these high ideals of purposeful existence to themselves—the paradox again of the government needing the Emergency to govern itself rather than an uncontrollably talkative country. The arguments snatched from the opposition also cut less ice, as India, as it went deeper into discipline, did not seem to become a dramatically less corrupt, inefficient, costly or poor country. Under such circumstances, it could appear to everyone that the loss of bourgeois democracy had been a waste.

SIGNS OF IRRATIONALITY

In 1979 two parallel developments began which were to end the Emergency eventually. With public discussions suspended, some of the worst features of our ancient culture began to assert themselves—openly dynastic suggestions, gratuitous abasement of political leaders, medieval sycophancy. 'Relocation' of poor people for reasons of offending middle or ruling class aesthetics, use of massive force in sterilisation campaigns all showed the state was becoming used to conditions of unaccountability and the usual insensitivity of third world authoritarianisms. Obviously this pursuit of sterility and beauty created intense opposition to itself, and it made an equally violent retribution to itself inevitable. As resistance to its policies grew, it was beset with inefficiencies of authoritarianism. First was the paradox of censorship. By destroying press freedom, the government simultaneously destroyed the credibility of its own—the only available—media. This had some subtler consequences. Rumours of disturbance are more powerful than news of disturbance. Since there were no news of disturbances in the censored press, rumours began to circulate of improbable and exaggerated resistance. Censorship became entirely counterproductive in its political function. Only if its purpose was the simple and perverse pleasure of denying information was it successful; if it was political, i.e., to deny news to keep people quiescent, it failed. The party structure became so ossified it could not mediate between any political forces at all. Finally, even vital government agencies began to fail—for excellent structural reasons. Members of the elite around Indira Gandhi had a purely derivative existence; they had no political base of their own, bases which they could lend to her in case of her need. Except for Devaraj Urs, all those who rose to eminence in the new Congress turned out to be liabilities. They had no control over politics in their regions even in the odious way in which the earlier conservative Congress leaders had. The politics of the Congress had come to its logical extreme point: centralisa-

tion meant that the point of resistance and gravity, to use a different metaphor, was simply one indispensable individual

Administratively too, the Emergency regime showed signs of irrationality. It was of course increasingly overloaded at the top. Much of the ostensible loyalty of her partymen who gratuitously asked Indira Gandhi to decide the most trivial of local issues, while an example of abjection, concealed a gesture of political abdication. Naturally this led to a clogging of decisions at the top, an already overloaded Centre taking more and more decisions about things of which it knew less and less. It is rumoured that when the government called for elections, its own intelligence system misled it to believe that it would win these elections—which is possible, since in times of authoritarianism it is not wise to carry anything except good news. It leads to a censorship in reverse. Emergency had also given rise to an invincible coalition against itself—of the urban and intellectual grievance at the abrogation of civil rights and the indignation against the terrifying form in which this was taken to the rural poor.¹⁹

Assessments of the Emergency experience must turn on some minimal questions. First, what was it about? Were there any long-term redistributions of power or economic benefits through that interlude? For obviously, in a situation in which public debate is in abeyance such redistributions can take place quietly, swiftly and finally. Secondly, what were the lessons of the Emergency for Indira Gandhi, how did it affect her politics in later years.²⁰

I have already said that I agree with a structural explanation of the Emergency, but I wish to modify it on one point. To say that the Emergency was directly a result of structural strains can lead to embarrassing implication for this theory. For a corollary which would seem to follow would be that by the end of the Emergency such structural strains must have eased considerably for the Emergency to be revoked. And since the ruling elements have never had to take recourse to such straightforward measures again it would imply that whatever the crisis in the mid-seventies, it did not exist afterwards. I wish to suggest on the contrary, that the crisis of politics has carried on. Consequently I prefer the idea that structural tendencies are not meant to explain individual events in history, and the Emergency had contingent causes. So the fact that the Emergency was revoked did not mean that the political crisis had ceased. The Emergency, in retrospect, was not deliberately meant to rework the structure or the internal weights inside the dominant coalition.

But how was the coalition doing in the meantime? The coalition of ruling classes was of course internally uneven, and because of their strategic situation and economic dominance the business and urban interests had a greater share of the fruits of inequality

than the more politically quiescent rural groups. Since agriculture largely stagnated in the Nehru years, the major beneficiaries of development were the industrial bourgeoisie and the urban professionals. However the logic of coalition creates a situation in which every move of every group has a dual value for it is not only a move against the elements outside the coalition, but also, to a lesser extent against those inside. As the power of the agricultural groups increased, there were more intense demands for a renegotiation of inequality or of payoffs inside the ruling bloc. Occasionally, disgruntled members of the ruling bloc can make temporary alliances with groups outside the coalition, weakening the bloc. If the 'voice' option does not work, they can pretend to use the 'exit' option to force a renegotiation of the terms of the class coalition.²¹ In class terms, this is precisely what seems to have happened with the rich peasant groups. After the late fifties there is a sustained efflux of these groups from the Congress beginning with Charan Singh in UP. For the next ten years or more this trend continued in North Indian states at least. However, by the seventies, it was clear that their move had achieved in part what they had demanded—a re-negotiation of the terms of the coalition, or, to put it differently, their "fair share" of the coalition's benefits. Every threat to leave the coalition is also an offer to remain if the benefits of inequality were more equally shared. Further pursuit of their objective could not be done by staying permanently out of the government party, but by rejoining its fold, at a higher price as it were. During the Emergency one discerns a tendency for rich farmers' interests to be rearticulated within the Congress, helped now by much greater hospitality of the ruling party to these groups. This was probably due to two related circumstances. First, after a certain level of secular growth in the economic power of this social group after the green revolution in North India, it became too important a segment to be neglected by the ruling party. Their influence spread across all political parties including the government. At the same time, the suspension of the ordinary party system during the Emergency meant that the earlier means of exerting pressure on the government by qualified defiance would not work. Now the only politically sensible thing was to get back into the Congress fold if they were not to be left out in the cold. Both the Congress perception of their indispensability and their perception of indispensability of the Congress made for their re-entry. Since this change did not take place dramatically, through open politics, but through quiet adjustments, it is often neglected. But the growing trend of the Congress losing support of rich peasants and emergence of farmers' parties as pressure lobbies is gradually replaced by a more mixed picture. But this development, though important and

relating to the basic class nature of politics, could not be traced to a deliberate redistribution of power and influence through the Emergency.

There was however, another important shift during the Emergency. Although it did not change the nature of the coalition in dominance, it did show some signs of changing government policy. Midway through the emergency the government began to talk of a more 'pragmatic' economic policy, diluting the earlier Nehruvian commitment to a reformist bourgeois programme and social design in favour of a different policy with less emphasis on the public sector, import substitution, administrative planning, with an accordingly greater reliance on market forces, price mechanisms, a strategy of export-led economic growth. In the later stages of Indira Gandhi's rule some of these measures for economic liberalisation were implemented.

Whatever its general impact on Indian society the Emergency experience did not change Indira Gandhi's politics. After the initial shock of the defeat there was a slight element of contrition in her assessments of the emergency period, but the particular form of the countermeasures the Janata administration took away much of the point of the Janata victory. The choice of Desai and Reddy as Prime Minister and President seemed to emphasise a conflict of individuals rather than of principles. Through its messy and undistinguished record the Janata administration let down its mandate badly, and failed to state with clarity the questions of principle implicit in the national experience of the emergency. Consequently, Indira Gandhi never had to face squarely the necessity to analyse, justify or exonerate the emergency to the national public. For the gradual slide of the Janata coalition into incoherence put other questions than the emergency before the electorate.

IV

If Indira Gandhi's defeat in 1977 was surprising, her victory and return to power in just three years was perhaps more so. Part of this transformation was of course due to the skill of the opposition in outplaying itself. Much of its three years in power the Janata government spent in debating what to do with Indira Gandhi rather than what to do with the country. It was the Janata phase which actually showed to what extent Indira Gandhi dominated Indian politics. However, the manner of her return to power showed that all the longer-term tendencies in Indian politics we have analysed before were still there, indeed, that they had intensified. It reconfirmed the structural crisis of Indian politics. This revealed itself in at least three different ways. First, the options of bourgeois politics seemed to be exhausted between the two packages offered by Janata and Congress—between incoherence and

repression. Each package seemed to reach a limit point after a time, and set off a reaction towards its opposite strategy. Oscillation in electoral fortunes seemed simply to reflect this exhaustion of alternatives. There was a crisis, in a second sense, in precisely the absence of a viable alternative to Indira Gandhi, despite some of her obvious failures in her evident indispensability under this dispensation—a form of politics in which she was both the problem and the only available solution. In a more fundamental sense, the crisis was reflected in the simultaneous presence of contradictory tendencies in the system. It failed to produce the political preconditions for the Nehru model of development.

However, crisis tendencies could configure differently at different times. In 1975 it was expressed in the conformation between two large national coalitions. Afterwards it has been replaced by a more insistent form of regional confrontation. An assessment of what Indira Gandhi has meant to Indian politics must involve an analysis of the nature of this regionalism.

Regionalism of the recent type is different from the regionalism of the fifties. This regionalism is often misrecognised as a recurrence of its earlier form. If that were true, then these could be solved by repeating moves which were successful during the Nehru period. Movements for regional autonomy or self-assertion in the fifties were in reality protests against the irrationalities of British administrative arrangements, which had put together territories into administrative units with utter disregard for linguistic or cultural formations. Such large administrative regions helped some regional elites to establish their preeminence in the presidencies. Bengalis in eastern India; and similarly strategically placed groups in other presidencies gained preemptive control of occupational openings against other groups. Understandably, after the end of British rule, there were demands for ending such sub-imperial domination and for linguistic rationalisation of the administrative machinery of the state. No doubt among the regional elites who led these movements cultural indignation was subtly and inextricably mixed with concupiscence about government jobs. Nehru, it appears, was precociously hesitant about granting the linguistic state idea.²² Of course the idea had twopowerful arguments in its favour: it was right in an abstract moral sense, and also administratively convenient. Still he had apprehensions about its long term effects. Some of those fears have turned out to be justified. A first difficulty was the unevenness in its applicability: in large parts of the country the principle could be applied, but there were some areas where the principle made less statistical or political sense. Besides, it left large linguistic minorities in every state, and given the political advantages of being a strident minority of any

sort, this could be a recipe for endless trouble. Finally, creation of linguistic states increased fears of regionalism in the Centre and has helped the case for centralisation as a counterweight. Correspondingly, a stronger centre has given legitimacy to regional forces, sometimes giving a regional complexion to what are not really regional demands.²³

The new regionalism is not a legacy of the British, or a product of something external to the system. It is produced by inequalities created by the operation of our political economy. Unevennesses which have caused regionalism during Indira Gandhi's time are structural, because they are there not despite the structure, but precisely because the structure is what it is. Indifference to regional inequalities created by our form of capitalist development have often led to intense regional grievances. In the short term, such difficulties are sought to be solved by either a co-operation of the leadership of by a politics of concessions.²⁴ Co-operation naturally does nothing to solve the problem, except to buy a political reprieve. If unsolved these grievances tend to re-emerge with greater violence, and are more intractable to solution, because the local leadership which could have figured in it is already discredited. Even if one particular irruption is solved by concessions, it tends to turn up elsewhere, and concessions are by definition not generalisable. If everybody is given the same treatment, it ceases to be a concession and loses its meaning; secondly, the resources needed for generalising such treatment are usually not there.

Sometimes, these structural problems were compounded by shortsighted electoral calculations. It is widely argued that the creation of a fundamentalist faction within Punjab politics was due to Congress encouragement, because of the obvious electoral advantage a split in Akali votes would give to the Congress. This shows how attempt at a short term electoral gain might lead to deep crises in political life which gradually get out of control. Thus, over the years the regional problem has assumed a particularly intractable form. There are incompatibilities not merely between Centre and the states, but, what is often, unnoticed, between the demands of the states themselves. It is apparent that demands of two types of regional movements—of which Punjab and Assam are paradigmatic examples—are uncomposable. For the Punjab demands, in purely economic terms, are for retaining the differentials of regional inequality in their favour, and the Assam demands are against a policy of genuine economic neglect of the area. Their incompatibility appears clearly if one considers hypothetical policies which might help meet them. The Punjab demands would require a greater insulation of regions and leaving them, especially the more prosperous ones to the logic of their own economic

operations—a sort of *laissez-faire* of regions' Satisfaction of grievances against regional underdevelopment on the other hand can be done only by some redistributive effort on the part of the Centre. There is hardly any policy which can satisfy both demands equally, although, ironically, both movements see the Centre as their common adversary. Effects of the green revolution, excessive accent on productivity increases through inequality and insensitivity to its political costs, and continued neglect of outlying regions by buying out their elites have gradually led to a configuration of regionalism which the political system simply cannot control. The system finds it impossible to rectify its causes because they are tied to the reproduction of the system itself. Most alarmingly, the events leading to Indira Gandhi's assassination shows a reappearance in Indian politics of the power of communal ideology which was certainly underestimated by the evolutionist political thought which informed both our state institutions and our political debate.²⁵ At her death, Indira Gandhi left an extremely mixed inheritance, some of the contradictions of which are yet to unfold.

V

What did the period of Indira Gandhi's rule mean for Indian politics, a period she dominated so completely? Surely, a general assessment would have to take into account India's political economy, and the relative successes and failures of her strategy of development, something that I have kept out of my picture. Despite occasional deviations, like the Emergency or the recent large IMF loan, there is no doubt that she wished to continue the basic frame of policy laid down by Nehru. In comparative terms, the advantages of this strategy over a satellite capitalist development are easy to see. Politically, despite strains, India has retained her democratic framework of government, although it has not spread effectively to transform political relations in the countryside, India has retained her politico-economic sovereignty, and perhaps expanded her room for choice and manoeuvre in a world which is still inhospitable to third world development. However, it could be uncharitably said that these are all consequences of the Nehru strategy, which Indira Gandhi simply continued, and in some cases she showed historical incomprehension of its basic theoretical design.

Although in the very long run, perhaps Indira Gandhi's regime would become historically indistinct from Nehru's, in the shorter term, there are some obvious differences. To put it schematically, Indira Gandhi retained the general framework of political economy laid down by Nehru; but her handling of questions of power increasingly destroyed the institutional and political preconditions for the effective pursuit of that strategy. The federal structure

of the Congress was destroyed, giving rise to a more centralised but less effective state apparatus—particularly because of her equation of the strength of the nation with power of the Central government. Nehru perhaps had less power as a prime minister, but he presided over a political system that was more effective; Indira Gandhi was more powerful as an individual, but dominating a system which was less politically viable. Power in political life is of two kinds; one is the power to deal with individuals and parties; and the other, which should really be called effectiveness, is the ability to attain and achieve more impersonal and longer-term goals. In Indira Gandhi's regime one finds a paradoxical split between these two types of power. Through the initiatives she took, Indira Gandhi certainly became an extraordinarily powerful individual, and people sometimes marvel at her transformation from the gentle apparently unspectacular individual to such a powerful ruler. The solution to this minor riddle should not be sought in the hidden reserves of strength in her personality, or in her traumas which Arun Shourie is so good at finding out,²⁶ but in the nature of the political structure, in a society that lacks institutions. She turned from the gentle minor politician to the fearful leader by the entirely unmysterious logic by which teenagers became builders of empires in medieval times. A highly centralised system of decisions invest individuals, if they are there for a long innings; with nearly mystic powers of indispensability. Gradually people become substitutes for institutions, because they do what institutions do elsewhere. Around such personalities myths of indispensability get built, which become the conditions of their real political indispensability. As a result, after her death, for some people who had a strong dislike for her, she became the substitute for all serious explanation. She became the uncaused cause for all evil.

Decline of political institutions meant a corresponding growth in the size and power of bureaucracies. Although it is fashionable to talk about bureaucratisation of socialist societies alone, there is probably equal or greater bureaucratisation of society in the Third World. Third World bureaucracies are larger, less accountable and socially more powerful than those elsewhere; for in both socialist and advanced capitalist societies there are effective countervailing organisations. In developed capitalism imperialist urges of the bureaucracy are contained by limitations of cost-effectiveness and the market, and partly by a culture permanently suspicious of accretions of political power. In socialist societies bureaucracies are subordinated to the party which sets its goals. Bureaucracies in the Third World are so powerful precisely because many of these discrete functions are concentrated inside it—of setting goals and policies, instrumental realisation of such goals, and even

the monitoring of costs, outlays and achievements. With the decline of any second-level group of politicians, bureaucracy has extended its control over Indian public life, increasingly suffocating by a self-reproducing, obstructive unproductive and unrepresentative apparatus.

Finally, the difficulties that have been left at Indira Gandhi's death represent a structural crisis of the capitalist strategy of development. But we must state clearly what is meant by a structural crisis. Marxists are often criticised for overplaying the crisis argument. If a system is considered to be always in a crisis, and the crisis apparently deepens without ever coming to a head, it is said there is something wrong with the idea of crisis itself. I believe that such objections are not as decisive as they appear. Crises are of course special types of difficulties, which can threaten but not necessarily result in the destruction of a system. All cases which go into medical crises do not end in fatalities; otherwise the concept of crisis would have been redundantly indistinguishable from a collapse. Crises of political systems or social forms can arise from various kinds of sources—external, contingent, structural.²⁷ Sub-optimal decisions of political leaders can be so crucially wrong as to result in crises. But here we are concerned with the sense in which marxists speak of structural or organic crises. Marx speaks of crises only when difficulties show certain special attributes: first, it must be self-produced, i.e., related to the reproduction of the basic dynamics of the system. These are in that sense not contingent, or accidental things, and unless something is done to stop them, they go on piling up and becoming more intense. In other words, they are not usually cancelled out by usual fluctuations of a system's performance. Secondly, a crisis of this type occurs when we find that two processes, x and y are equally necessary for system S, but each hinders and exacerbates the other, and produce problems of resolution or compatibility. This leads to a three-way problem: there is an incompatibility between x and y which are equally and necessarily produced by S; if they are both produced indefinitely they may, through their conflict, put intolerable internal strain on S and make its survival doubtful; it is therefore necessary for S to do something about this x-y incompatibility to survive; but if something radical is to be done to it S cannot remain S. This seems to me to be meaning of the idea of long-term crisis tendencies in a social form. This, if the reading is correct, also seems to fit the present crisis of Indian capitalism.

What is remarkable about the period of Indira Gandhi is not the occurrence of serious problems, but their insistence. Individual political problems are sometimes got over, but a general crisis never seems to get away. From 1966 onwards the periodisa-

tion I have suggested is basically a sequence of crises. And every time political difficulties have reappeared sooner and in more intense and intractable forms, and in different ways extracted high political costs. Thus the difficulty could be called structure-related in two senses. First, because of their sheer persistence, because the theory that it is a case of an uninterrupted run of bad luck is too thin. A more interesting idea would be to ask who do the difficulties not go away, or ease, or stop altogether? Are these difficulties arising in spite of the system, or rather because of it? Schematically these seem to arise out of the asymmetries of backward capitalism, inability of its weak impulse of development to rework the cultural and social levels of the social form, failure to rectify existing inequality and to prevent new distributive irrationalities of the growth process, and a tendency to destroy the political and institutional preconditions which are necessary for this strategy. It is impossible to outline a larger theoretical argument of this kind here. But its phenomena! expressions are clear in the story that we have traced. It is shown in the questions which were central to the referenda—in 1971 it was whether poverty was to be removed, in 1977 whether we should have democracy, in 1980 a minimal basic order, in 1985 whether India could exist as an integral unit, surely an intriguing way of moving forward. Defenders of her regime would often say that over the last years, in some ways, the economy has done quite well. But it could well be that there are limits to such relative autonomy of the economy.

There is no doubt that we are inside a period which is still dominated by her initiatives and which will be known by her name. Her death and the elections afterwards did not mark the end of her period, but only showed its continuity. Despite her assassination, her image was crucial to the last elections. It was the last election, or referendum, she won for the Congress—most decisively and most tragically. The first election for Rajiv Gandhi is yet to come.

Notes

- 1 Francine Frankel, (1978) gives a detailed account of the developments in the Congress at the time of Nehru's death. Cf chapters 6, 7
- 2 Gramsei (1971), 106 ff. Buci-Glucksmann (1980) draws, in my judgment, too strong a connection between passive revolution, caesarism and fascism, making it difficult to apply it to more mixed cases.
- 3 This was also largely the initial leftist picture of her, because of her role in toppling the Communist ministry in Kerala.
- 4 The idea that the state power in India was coalitional had been quite common among Marxists since mid-sixties. In Communist party literature this is expressed in terms of the more conventional terminology of an alliance of classes. For a more academic

- argument using the idea of a dominant coalition, cf Pranab Bardhan (1984), chapters 6, 7 and 9.
- 5 Conventionally, the professional elites were not considered part of the ruling class coalition.
- 6 Although this idea comes originally from Gramsei, it could be found, in the modern literature, in Poulantzas (1973), Miliband (1983), Olin Wright (1978), Therborn (1978), and Buci-Glucksmann (1971).
- 7 I have tried to state the case for such an explanation elsewhere, Kaviraj (1984).
- 8 The most well known exposition of this party model is in the work of Rajni Kothari. Cf Kothari (1970). He was also sensitive to the changes worked into it by the emergency. Cf Kothari (1976).
- 9 Max Zins (1978).
- 10 Kaviraj (1980).
- 11 Frankel (1978) gives a detailed account of such pressures:
- 12 Cf Gramsci (1971).
- 13 Frankel (1978), chapter 1.
- 14 Kothari (1984) has tried to analyse the consequences of populism.
- 15 Manor (1983).
- 16 I have tried to spell out this argument about institutional decline in Kaviraj (1984).
- 17 An analysis of such longer term statistics can be found in Bardhan (1984); one attractive feature of Bardhan's analysis is precisely his unwillingness to derive or deduce explanations of political events from long-term structural trends.
- 18 Sometimes, it is argued, using statistics prepared by the Shah Commission that the number of arrests during the Emergency were 'not very large' considering the size of the country. This is a seriously flawed argument on two counts. No amount of statistics can capture the change in political atmosphere during the Emergency. For those who were not arrested also decisively altered their political behaviour. There can be statistics of arrests, but not statistics of fear. Secondly, it avoids the moral issues involved in denial of freedom.
- 19 For future details of the actual politics of the Emergency, Frankel (1978), chapter 13.
- 20 For an example of Indira Gandhi's response to the Emergency in retrospect, see Carras (1979), chapter IX. Also, chapters 1, 2, and 3 in Gandhi (1984).
- 21 To use terms from Hirschman (1970).
- 22 Gopal (1979) and (1984),
- 23 For instance, the conflict between the Centre and the Left Front government in West Bengal are not often strictly regional contentions; still, they get structured that way.
- 24 Both these solutions were untidily tried out in cases of Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Punjab.
- 25 Kaviraj (1984).
- 26 Shourie (1978).
- 27 For a theory of organic crises, see Gramsci (1971), 210-218.

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Garware Paints

GARWARE PAINTS has recently added to its laboratory at Thane a computer colour matching system, one of the latest sophisticated instrument. Manufactured by Applied Colour Systems, USA, it consists of a spectrophotometer attached to an IBM computer. The spectrophotometer works on the principle of a reflective reflectance pattern that is unique for each colour, which is obtained from the visible spectrum range. This computer colour matching system will greatly help to solve various colour problems faced by the different departments engaged in the manufacture of paints.